


“Contested Historical Interpretations and the Narrative of the Angolan-South Africa War 1987-1988 - A military outcome?”

by
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Abstract

The end of the 1980s brought about great changes throughout the world, the end of the Cold War – globally, as well as the end of apartheid in South Africa. For South Africans these two events can be seen in the narratives which surround the Angolan Border/Civil War, as it contained all the elements of a Cold War struggle and is heralded by some as a turning point towards the end of apartheid. The outcomes of this conflict are hotly contested, each side claiming a victory for themselves. The Cuban, ANC, and MPLA narrative would have us believe that the SADF was defeated through military might. And the SADF narrative argues that they were not defeated in Angola. This thesis will look at those claims, and judge them on their merit, but will ultimately find that all the major players in this conflict emerged heads held high, and the only losers were the Angolan people.

Die einde van die 1980's het wêreldwyd groot veranderinge meegebring: op globale skaal die einde van die Koue Oorlog, asook die einde van apartheid in Suid-Afrika. Suid-Afrikaners kan hierdie twee gebeurtenisse terugvind in die narratiewe oor die Angolese Grens- en Burgeroorlog. Hierdie oorlog bevat al die elemente van 'n Koue Oorlog-stryd en word deur sommige kommentators erken as 'n draaipunt wat gelei het tot die einde van apartheid. Die uitkomst van hierdie konflik word hewig betwis, want albei kante eis vir hulself oorwinning op. Die Kubaanse, ANC- en MPLA-narratief wil ons laat glo dat die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag (SAW) deur militêre mag verslaan is. En die SAW-narratief voer aan dat hulle nie in Angola verslaan is nie. Hierdie tesis sal hierdie aansprake bekyk en in terme van hul eie waarde beoordeel, maar sal uiteindelik tot die slotsom kom dat al die belangrikste deelnemers aan hierdie konflik daaruit getree het met hul koppe omhoog, en dat die enigste verloorders die Angolese bevolking was.

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Introduction

Towards the end of the era of Independence in Africa, the continent became vulnerable to the politics of the world stage. The unaligned third world states¹ were ripe for the extension of the Cold War and Africa provided a 'battleground' that was safely away from both the Soviet Union and the United States of America. The former colonies of Portugal are a prime example of this, due to Portugal's sluggish attitude towards relinquishing control over its colonies in Africa. As such, independence movements formed in colonies like Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, and Angola. As a Western ally of Portugal, the United States could not capitalise on an emerging vacuum by courting the emerging leaderships, and instead the Soviet Union was able to gain a foothold in ex-Portuguese colonies. These shifts in alignment created tensions for the powerhouse of the continent, apartheid South Africa, which felt threatened by the 'communist menace' on its doorstep.

¹Third world meaning: The group of developing nations, especially of Asia and Africa, which did not align themselves with the policies of either the U.S. or the former Soviet Union.

In Angola specifically, The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (hereafter the MPLA) created an issue for the South African government, as it was 'communist-aligned', as well as harbouring, and sympathising with the independence movement of South West Africa, the South West Africa People's Organization (hereafter SWAPO). Between the period of Angola losing its colony status in 1975, through to 1989, South Africa intervened militarily on behalf of the opposition to the MPLA, first the National Liberation Front of Angola (hereafter FNLA), and later The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (hereafter UNITA). Towards the end of the 1980s, the South Africans drastically escalated their intervention as a result of a People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (hereafter FAPLA) offensive on the UNITA stronghold of Mavinga, the results of which have long been subject to debate by observers. The South African intervention only ended in 1989, after tripartite talks between the MPLA, Cuba, and South Africa which coursed throughout 1988. This dissertation has been written in order to try to bring together and to compare the varying narratives which have been created around the events of 1987-1988, in which the SADF (South African Defence Force) and UNITA fought against the MPLA and its Cuban allies. Through this comparison of narratives there has also been the emergence of a further and distinctly different formulation, one which promotes the militaristic aspects of 1987-1988 over diplomatic and political ones. This 'battle-centric' narrative is present in both of what might be termed pro-SADF and anti-SADF literature, and detracts from a full understanding of the complex forces that allowed both the beginning and the end of this conflict. To this end, this study concludes that a currently emerging broad narrative should take centre stage, and should focus more on the political, economic and diplomatic aspects of this war, but which ought not to ignore the military aspects either.

The conflict between Angola and South Africa, known as the *Border War*, has become a growing field of historical interest and debate, especially over the last few years and is becoming more relevant today than ever. Strikingly labelled "The Forgotten War" by Gary Baines, The Angolan-South African border conflict has not been a major part of the public national consciousness until more recently, when the African National Congress (hereafter ANC) highlighted the importance of remembering the border war battle of Cuito Cuanavale. For instance, a set of newspaper articles written in 2007 and 2008 respectively, commemorated the border war and focused on the Angolan and Cuban lives lost. In an article published by the *Mail and Guardian* in 2007, Piero Gleijeses was perhaps the first to draw the ire of past SADF servicemen when he depicted 'the battle of Cuito Cuanavale' as a great defeat for the SADF.² The experiences of these veterans did not match the narrative put forward in this type of article, nor of those propounded by the Cuban and current post-apartheid South African governments.

² Gleijeses <http://mg.co.za/article/2007-07-11-cuito-cuanavale-revisited>

This version of a great South Africa defeat at Cuito was later reinforced by South African President Jacob Zuma's presence, alongside a parliamentary delegation, at the laying of the foundation stone to a monument to "the Cuito Cuanavale battle, in honour of heroes fallen during this epic period".³ From June the 21st to July the 3rd of 2015, South Africa played host to "the Cuban five" who, amongst other things, visited the monument to Cuban soldiers who had fought in Angola in Pretoria's Freedom Park. Accordingly, Angola and what has become identified as a pivotal Battle for Cuito Cuanavale has becoming steadily a more and more relevant political factor in public discourse around the regional 'politics of liberation' and independence. A consequence of this is that growing numbers of SADF veterans have come to feel their *lived* history, and that their uniformed past is being overwritten or otherwise distorted. The Rhodes University historian, Gary Baines, has addressed this notion in his recent book, *South Africa's 'Border War': contested narratives and conflicting memories*⁴, which focuses strongly on the power of memory. Baines suggests that for the SADF veterans, their 'war narrative' is inextricably intertwined with their own sense of identity, thus making any attack on this narrative also an attack on their identity.⁵ For such a group, the apparent imposition of the ANC's official version of Angolan-South African events is therefore an offence against the personal experiences of its affected constituents, and represents an attack on the proper understanding of the history of the country in the closing decades of the past century.

This 'attack' or attempt to construct a particularly partisan 'new' history is best shown by the changes made to the schools' Nation Senior Certificate curriculum. In 2013, the South African government altered its education system to accommodate CAPS (Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements) and the topic of Angola was added to the Cold War section of the History matriculation syllabus.⁶ The current generation of school matriculants and future matriculants are unlikely to have a parent who might have served in the border war, and as such their primary interaction or knowledge of this part of South Africa's history is most likely to come from the school syllabus. To its credit, the school syllabus has adopted an open interpretative stance on Angola, acknowledging that there are differing narratives. At the same time, though, this historical latitude is also subject to the publisher of the textbooks which are not standardised across the platform.⁷

³ http://www.portalangop.co.ao/angola/en_us/noticias/politica/2008/2/12/Parliament-Speaker-Lays-Foundation-Stone-for-Monument-Cuito-Cuanavale-Battle,89a10149-d82c-4736-b598-d7502c56f20c.html

⁴ This recently published book is not available in South African bookshops, as such this study has used the Kindle version available from Amazon.com and citations use the location format in place of page numbers.

⁵ Baines loc 337

⁶ National Curriculum Statement (NCS):Further Education and Training Phase Grades 10-12 . pp. 26

⁷ Oxford in search of History pg110-111. Used by Parel Vallei Hoer-Skool Somerset West

Such considerations aside, the apparent core emphasis on the ‘battle of Cuito Cuanavale’ is an issue which is central to the thrust of this thesis, as the perspective provided implies that the narrative of SADF defeat is the correct one, in addition to placing an over-emphasis on the battle-centric viewpoint which detracts from all other narratives. The limitations of such an approach towards understanding of the past are made even more important in light of statements in more recent years by Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga who has suggested that history should be made a compulsory Matriculation subject in South African public schools.⁸ By way of a critical response to this, the present study will focus on the position of varying authors, and on varying works that may have the ability to influence the stance taken by the average reader. Much of the literature supporting the importance of the ‘battle of Cuito Cuanavale’ has been written by people of considerable influence, or whose influence is shown by the consistent citation of their works in justification of their narrative interpretations.

As such, this work seeks to lay out and to compare narratives presented by the SADF supporters, and by those who believe that the ‘battle for Cuito Cuanavale’ was an important turning point in the history of Southern Africa. It will first explore the narrative presented by the SADF, and will seek to demonstrate that the secondary sources used are consistent with the information found within the SADF primary documents gathered from the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) Military Intelligence Archive. In this construction of events and outcomes, the Republic’s forces prevailed. Then, the thesis will go on to examine the narratives of influential authors who have claimed that the SADF was defeated at the ‘battle of Cuito Cuanavale’ and that this defeat had far-reaching effects on the fortunes of the apartheid order and on the entire future of Southern Africa.

In the final chapter, this study will address both narratives, consider how they work together, and look at how the sources have been created and utilised to achieve a desired effect. It will argue that the narrative emphasising the ‘battle of Cuito Cuanavale’ factor is seriously lacking in both sources and reasoning, while representations of the SADF narrative contain a good level of detail, and reasonable argumentation, largely countering the arguments made by ‘anti-SADF’ authors, such as Horace Campbell – a writer whom we will encounter in due course. The work will conclude on a note highly critical of the fixation on military aspects of the border war by both sides, and in favour of a more balanced war narrative, one which was teased out by the scholarly journalist, Leopold Scholtz, and which was furthered in another direction by the academic historian, Gary Baines, in his latest book. A fixation on the narrow story of military victories or defeats serves as a reductionist element which actually detracts from the real

⁸ <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-07-16-education-dept-looks-to-history-to-fix-sas-pride>

significance of this conflict to the history of Southern Africa, as well as detracting from the experiences of those soldiers who fought there in the service of their country's ruling interests.

Methodology

This section serves the purpose of alleviating the need for a text over-burdened by constant footnotes, and seeks to answer issues that are not immediately relevant to the material found throughout. The present study has used a selection of sources, primary and secondary, in the explanation of the narratives surrounding the topic of the Angolan border war. The primary sources used in this paper are taken directly from the South African National Defence Force Military Intelligence archive in Pretoria. All of the documents contained within are accessible to any member of the public under the Freedom of information Act, subject to declassification. This means that when we access documents from this source we must approach them with a degree of scepticism. The documents available to the public might only be so because they do not contain information that might incriminate a specific person, or reveal what the keepers of records might consider to be a state secret. A more conspiratorial mind might suggest that the documents available are there to underpin a specific narrative, that the arguments formulated by this thesis (which are reliant on the primary sources) were engineered by the archivists to make the SADF narrative appear 'factual' or accurate or true.

To address this, we need to bear in mind that there has obviously been a change of power within South Africa's military structures; the SANDF is as different to the SADF, as the SADF was different to the earlier UDF or Union Defence Force. On balance, it is improbable that, as an organisation, the SANDF has been systematically doctoring or "covering up" the full documentary record of the SADF. Indeed, a specific primary source used predominantly in this study presented an interesting conflict of an accidental kind during its writing. It appeared that the author, Helmoed Romer-Heitman, was quoting *verbatim* from a SADF highly confidential document in his book, *War in Angola*, published in December 1990, despite the fact that the document was only declassified in 2008.

After making personal contact with Mr Romer-Heitman, he made it clear that he had been present at the time of its compilation by Commandant van Moltke.⁹ This, arguably, lends extra authenticity to *War in Angola*, as its author was able to quote official figures and operational Instructions to which other contemporary authors had no access. In the Preface, Romer-Heitman references the "notes" provided to him by van Moltke, so this documentation was not something that was hidden, despite its evidently confidential nature. The essence of Helmoed

⁹ It is also due to Mr Heitman that I have the name of the author.

Romer-Heitman's book is that it was also directed and influenced by officers and other individuals who were part of the events described; their interviews and 'fact checking' are in fact acknowledged as an important aspect of the work. Notwithstanding its author's known close association with the Republic's defence establishment, both in the apartheid era and in the post-apartheid period, there can be little doubt over his close and knowledgeable links with the primary material. The historical importance of this is underlined by the absence of parts 2 and possibly 3 of an official work of fundamental importance to this aspect of the Angolan conflict, *The Concise History of Operation Modular*, which did not feature within the archival J. F. Huyser collection alongside phase 1.¹⁰ Given this absence, it made sense to look to the comprehensiveness of Helmoed Romer-Heitman's detailed account for establishing a reasonably credible narrative, as he has had access to the apparently unsifted notes which comprised the documents that are lacking.

Addressing the secondary sources, I have not, of course, used all the available literature written by SADF supporters. There are numerous personal accounts of the war, but these mostly 'individual experience' histories do not engage with the broader picture narratives as do those examples that are included in this discussion. Many of these sources also present strongly partial arguments; upon reading some of the work by General Jannie Geldenhuys, for instance, it became immediately apparent that his accounts are triumphalist in tone, and do not acknowledge any of the SADF failings or shortcomings addressed within more authoritative accounts by authors like Romer-Heitman and Fred Bridgland. The need to include consideration of Romer-Heitman and of Bridgland is, of course, fairly self-evident, as almost all literature on the experience of the SADF in Angola includes a reference to one or both of these authors. Their books remain the foundation of writing about the SADF perspective on the Angolan border war.

The reasoning behind selecting the series of articles which support the idea of the war undergoing a turning point at Cuito Cuanavale is not because of their – arguably – indifferent quality, but rather because each article or author has a sphere of influence. The questionable quality of their analysis and factual checking is precisely why they matter – not simply to a counter-argument perspective, but because since publication they have come to represent an established certainty or wisdom for many readers. The level of importance of these sources is perhaps best highlighted by their widespread use by even established professional scholars. Accordingly, it was both a surprise and a delight to discover that all of the sources addressed in

¹⁰ It is always possible that they are elsewhere in the archive, but finding them will require intimate knowledge of the archive or luck. My visit was also poorly timed and coincided with the archivist in charge of visitors last day of work.

chapter 4 also feature in Gary Baines's very recent book of 2014. This not only highlights the influence of this secondary material, but also its continuing contemporary relevance.

The approach I have taken towards the events portrayed is one of weighing up the sides and attempting to make a statement about the events that unfurled around the conflict between 1987-1989. I do this by approaching the different narratives and stating their cases. In the 'case' of the SADF narrative, there is much more content to cover, so I have devoted more time and effort in trying to establish the full picture provided. Equally, however, I have had to limit the scale of information included, as literature on the SADF includes a great deal of minutiae. In the 'case' of the counter-narratives, there is far less to go on, and so they are restricted to a single chapter. I hope that in this respect I have not weakened their fundamental arguments, as for a full understanding of the complexities of these contending narratives we need to understand the arguments fully. After outlining the cases of the authors, or at least how I have interpreted them, I then weighed up what looks to have been the more likely or historically persuasive contention. The question posed is not one of was there a victor, as it is arguable that there was no one side that clearly won any aspect of the Angolan conflict. Rather, the question I hope to be able to answer in the pages which follow is whether the narratives under examination are accurate in the attempt to pose the Angolan conflict as a series of military victories and defeats, or is the alternative narrative of peace talks, negotiations and jockeying politics, truer to the circumstances of those turbulent years.

Literature Review

As this thesis is based on written literature, there is less value in addressing in depth its content here, than in devoting this section to a brief consideration of general trends and issues within various aspects of the overall writings on the Angolan 'Border War'. This will include authors from both sides covered in the study, and will attempt to classify the different types of literature into different categories.

This literature review starts by briefly looking at the type of secondary source which has not been utilised, due to its clearly biased or misleading nature, showing a lack of awareness of the potential merits of other viewpoints. Some of these sources can be seen as being of a fringe variety, such as the writings of Stuart Sterzel, but others are more mainstream in standing. The best examples of the mainstream sources are works such as those by General Jannie Geldenhuys, which are clearly biased and even contain inexplicably extraneous rugby information. Such works weaken what might otherwise be a clear and sober narrative by putting forward their own triumphalist version of events. In the case of the explicitly pro-SADF perspective, there are a large number of authors who have written according to different motivations – each should be considered individually for their own value – and those that display a shared consistency can be seen as comprising a common narrative. As such, we need to understand the kind of literature which does not make it into *the* pro-SADF narrative that this study explores.

One way of approaching this is to use a recent paper by Stuart Sterzel as an example of the kind of source which is an 'outlier' from the larger narrative – it shares many of the same assumptions, but differs sufficiently to be inconsistent with the established picture. There are a few key points to bear in mind in regard to Sterzel's position. The only source of his *South Africa and the Angolan War* is *Academia.edu*, a tool for sharing papers. Also of note is that although writing history, this author is not a professional scholar with links to the academy. Nonetheless, Sterzel is frequently cited and has contributed to news websites like www.iol.co.za, using his personal experiences and inside knowledge from his period as a "recce", a member of South Africa's Special Forces. As a consequence, it is natural to expect bias, or a leaning in favour of the SADF and especially its Special Forces operations in Angola.

South Africa and the Angolan War is in itself highly comprehensive at first glance, and it is also ambitious in its goal to debunk the 'myths' surrounding the SADF's role in the Angolan war. A first and obvious issue is that Sterzel's work fails to disentangle the complexities of the Cold War links. There is virtually an obsession with the involvement of the USSR, going so far as to

negate much of the individual Angolan and Cuban agency in the Southern African upheaval, and representing the actions of Cuba and the MPLA as merely those of Soviet proxies. This argument has been strongly critiqued by Piero Gleijeses in an article published in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*.¹ Sterzel's assumptions about the puppet-master role of the USSR are made apparent early in his study, as he classifies the 'participants' as being 'On the USSR side' and 'On the South African and UNITA side'.² Incidentally, It is interesting to note that the latter side is not characterised as the 'American side', given that this author has emphasised the Angolan war as wholly part of the context of the Cold War.

Sterzel has also made numerous findings which conflict with the 'factual' reports of events provided by other detailed 'pro-SADF' sources, such as an apparent tactical moment when the SADF is asserted to have trapped enemy FAPLA troops in an area of fighting terrain at Cuito Cuanavale which became known as the Tumpo 'pocket'³.

This is a representation of Cuito Canavale events which is not to be found in any other pro-SADF literature, and among more authoritative versions of the Angolan conflict, such as that presented by Fred Bridgland, whose coverage of the same period does not suggest that the SADF was in a position to have trapped the FAPLA forces at that point. Still, Sterzel has spent a great deal of effort in debunking the "mythology" around the 'battle of Cuito Cuanavale', and has also identified authors like Ronnie Kasrils and Horace Campbell as being influential in conveying interpretations which are alleged to amount to a form of 'disinformation'. Overall, Sterzel's study is not one to be ignored, even though it is difficult to evaluate its accuracy as a whole, given the large range of unverified claims. Added to this is the writer's obvious and extreme pro- South Africa bias, such as exculpating its government over the 'crime of apartheid' by laying blame upon the hostile pressures exerted by other world powers. Furthermore, Sterzel's 'direct' observations accounts are not consistent with other contemporary accounts provided by SADF officers in works such as those by Fred Bridgland. These are the kinds of considerations which influenced the decision on what kind of sources were to be used for the pro-SADF narratives in this investigation. There needs to be a working consistency between the secondary sources before primary sources are even examined. In essence, then, Sterzel's article represents what might be categorised as the fringe narrative of the SADF. For the 'anti-SADF' equivalent of this, we would require a similar perspective from a Cuban or FAPLA soldier, neither of which appear to be available in an accessible English translation at the present time.

¹ Gleijeses. Moscow's Proxy

² Sterzel, Stuart. "South Africa and the Angolan War." (2014).

https://www.academia.edu/15584636/Paper_South_Africa_and_the_Angolan_War. 21 Oct. 2015 pp.9-10

³ Usually referred to as the Tumpo Triangle

Having designated the type of historical source that this work has sought to skirt in establishing the SADF narrative, we now look at the type of source that this study deems more useful. To this end, there are two pivotal books which feature in almost all research done hitherto on the Angolan war: *War in Angola* by Helmoed Romer-Heitman, and *The War for Africa* by Fred Bridgland. Both Romer-Heitman and Bridgland were key reporters during the Angolan war, and it was Fred Bridgland who is widely credited with having first brought the 'Bush war' to public knowledge. It is this very nature of their field roles that make their narratives so compelling. Both appear to be looking for a good story in a journalistic sense, and in the case of Bridgland, his perspectives show that he felt no allegiance to the SADF. Yet his version of events fits in line with the SADF narrative of victory in Angola.

Both Romer-Heitman and Bridgland have based their books on interviews done with officers in the SADF, but Bridgland's book relies considerably more on those interviews. In the chapters dealing with battles, Bridgland provides the reader with a first person account, which really shows a great attention to detail and even provides a strong social history flavour. These accounts do tend to paint the SADF in a very triumphalist manner, as these chapters are informed by a specific officer who focuses on the bravery of his men and/or fellow officers. Aside from the direct re-telling of events, Bridgland also provides a good top-down view of the events from an SADF perspective, and this we must assume results from his interviews with Generals like Jannie Geldenhuys, as well as SADF field commanders who were apprised of the situation that faced the SADF. While the level of detail and use of sources by Bridgland makes his book very valuable to any study on Angola, it is, however, slight on basic academic features.⁴ The lack of footnotes means that when he adopts a more general tone, and is providing us with the top-down view of events in Angola, we do not know where the information is specifically coming from. This is a drawback, as when Bridgland mentions that he has also based some of his writing on interviews with Cuban ex-general Del Pino – for, without referencing, we can only speculate which sections have been influenced by the Del Pino source.

What is most interesting about Bridgland (which he shares with Romer-Heitman) is that he does not claim an outright victory for the SADF. Romer-Heitman, for his part, treads a fine line in providing General Geldenhuys's reasoning behind why in his view the SADF had achieved victory in Angola, and is suggesting that it was the apartheid government's studied silence that allowed contrary claims of an SADF defeat to become rife. Bridgland himself states that the notion of victory in Angola in general is a complex one, and proposes that asking about who won is possibly the wrong question. Here, Fred Bridgland could be said to have been ahead of his own time, in putting forward a narrative suggesting that there were actually few losers who

⁴ Not being an academic, Bridgland is not required to adhere to these conventions.

emerged from the negotiations; looking at each major element, the South Africans, the Cubans, and the United States, he concluded that all of these groups emerged victorious in some way or another. What makes this notable is that given that Bridgland's work was mostly based on interviews with officers and soldiers, one might have expected a more one-dimensional narrative to have been the result. Instead, at an interpretative level, Bridgland shows a level of even-handed balance and detachment in his writings which was uncommon until scholars like Leopold Scholtz began seriously researching the nature of the Angolan war in the 2000s and onwards.

Helmoed Romer-Heitman's study is notable in different ways from Bridgland, and that stems from the proximity this author had to the inner circle of the SADF. Very specific details presented in the classified document, *The Concise History of Operation Modular*, are also mentioned in Romer-Heitman's book, *War in Angola*. When questioned about this, Romer-Heitman informed me that his book was produced through a combination of interviews and access to an initial draft of the SADF document, *The Concise History of Operation Modular*, as compiled by Commandant van Moltke. According to Romer-Heitman, this was permitted on the basis that he was allowed to read only the draft document - as such, there are unreferenced parts of Romer-Heitman's book which directly relate to sections of this 'in-house' SADF document.

This inside track provides us with a valuable source, as Romer-Heitman's empirical accounts of the Angolan military experience do not appear to be overly exaggerated or partisan. He sets out to achieve this by providing the reader with a straightforward chronological approach to the Angolan War. In this account, Romer-Heitman covers the military battles and some of the SADF-politics that accompanied South African victories and defeats. A strong feature is that Romer-Heitman's chronicle does not simply gloss over the failings of the SADF, arguing that it appears that learning from failure was one of the conscious internal processes within the SADF. This writer provides us with an account of every battle from 1987 onwards, as well as giving the reader a glimpse into the detailed planning that accompanied both the run-up and wind-down from each encounter with FAPLA forces. Granted, the declared intimate relationship that Romer-Heitman had with the SADF is one which should cause the reader to pause. Equally, his account pulls no punches, and it shows little sign of straining hard to convince the reader through emotive language or tales of heroism. Instead, opting for a sober rather than a florid tone, he attempts to reconstruct the events as he has found them through interviews, documents, and reported personal experience, and accompanies these accounts with factual

statistics and other figures⁵. In summing up, Romer-Heitman appears not to see any defeat for the SADF. He contends that the SADF had achieved its operational objectives of 1987 by countering the FAPLA advance, but that the unfolding of the events of 1988 were overshadowed by the negotiations. The concessions made by South Africa are not considered to have been losses by Romer-Heitman, arguing that with no supportive Cuban presence, SWAPO was not a threat to South African interests. His unambiguous summation of Angolan circumstances, while open to question, does not, however, necessarily detract from the quality of the entire narrative, as the information provided, combined with issues which he ignores in his conclusion, still make for a useful text on the war.

The most balanced account of the Angolan war, in my view, is the comprehensive overview produced by Leopold Scholtz. Scholtz, who has frequently published articles on the subject of the Angolan war in the journal *Militaria Scientia*, eventually compiled his extensive research into a book in 2013. Scholtz's preceding articles are well written and logically sound, they ask questions about the nature of the SADF operations in Angola, and answer them using a persuasive measure of reason. Scholtz deftly demonstrates that the SADF campaign in Angola did not end in defeat by concentrating on the operational objectives of the SADF throughout the conflict. In the case of 1987-1988 it is clear that the SADF achieved much of its objectives, which he confirms using a variety of sources without twisting statements, including those which would normally be used to argue for an SADF defeat. The main source of interest in all of Scholtz's work, both articles and his book, is that of the: *61 mechanised battalion online archive*. Regrettably, for those trying to follow Scholtz in his research, this resource has seemingly disappeared, as the 61 mech battalion website no longer offers a link to their archive.⁶ Despite this issue, Scholtz' work has been a significant factor in this study, as his book provides arguably the first most balanced account of the Angolan war. Scholtz frequently applies valid reasoning to the points made by other 'pro-SADF' sources such as his questioning of the use of statistics to claim South African victories in operations which did not primarily achieve their objectives. Another point in Scholtz' favour is that he provides the Cubans and Angolans with a significant degree of agency and does not treat them as rearguard movements, as well as not depicting them as simple pawns of the USSR. In his conclusion about the outcome of the Angolan war, Scholtz looks from each faction's perspective and attempts to see whether they achieved their goals. Like Bridgland before him, Scholtz concludes that each of the major factions involved in this conflict emerged victorious in some aspect. His ability to 'pick' a side without demeaning

⁵ These figures are 'verified' mostly through the aforementioned SADF document.

⁶ An email was sent to the site admin querying this in July 2015, but no response has returned. Direct URLs can yield results when accessing the material, but there is no way to find these sources without prior knowledge.

the other narratives at play is what makes him a valuable source in any future work on the subject of the Angolan hostilities.

In a similar vein to Leopold Scholtz, Gary Baines recently published a well - structured and academically informed book in 2014, titled *South Africa's 'Border War': Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*. The book is comprised of a series of essays about the 'Border War', a great many of which are devoted to material that is not entirely relevant to this present study. Where Baines becomes relevant is in his chapter dealing with the "Battle of Cuito Cuanavale". In this essay, Baines sets out to adopt a balanced approach towards dispelling myths from both sides which surround this period, by introducing the concept of a "battle-centric" approach. While the author focuses this more towards partisan, nationalistic ANC and Cuban narratives, demythologising is undoubtedly applicable to all sides of this 'debate', as virtually all historical commentators are culpable of reducing the balance sheet of the Angolan conflict to military matters alone. Baines also adopts a view associated increasingly with contemporary authors and historians – namely, that the Angolan 'Border War' was not a war of "victors or vanquished", but rather one that was resolved on the basis of concession. Of particular note is that like those writers who have considered the ANC's 'battle' mythology surrounding the outcome of the Cuito contest, Baines has emphasised the more decisive geopolitical events that unfolded afterwards, to argue that it has little basis on which to claim a victorious outcome. His work provides an important even-handed approach in a field of interpretation that has long been highly polarised. Again, as with Scholtz, Baines's *Contested Narratives* will be essential to virtually all future research on the Angolan border war.

On the "other" side of the Angolan war narratives we have the emergence of distinct thematic groups. The first of these is what might be termed the stock Cuban narrative. The second is a stand-alone perspective which uses information from various sources to create an anti-apartheid South Africa narrative. This narrative is used by many as a backbone for their political beliefs, and it becomes most apparent when we examine the view put forward by the ANC and some of its influential authorial voices in later discussion in this thesis. The relevant articles that have been chosen for critique were selected because their authors are all influential figures and what they wrote – however much subject to later revision - have carried weight in understandings of contemporary history. As such, it is important that questionable 'inaccuracies' and 'falsehoods' that are included in these accounts are highlighted, in order both to understand how these narratives were generated, and to establish if they are in fact based on misinformation.

The first of these treatments to explore is the conventional Cuban narrative which naturally features in this thesis on several occasions. The most notable and also the most plainly stated accounts are those of Fidel Castro and Jorge Risquet, as recorded by David Deutschman but this perspective is also in part fed by Pierro Gleijeses. In the accounts provided by Deutschman we are given an uneven mixture of useful information which provides an insight into the Cuban perspective, and then predictable propaganda. The greatest issue when dealing with any literature on the contested topic of the 'Border War' is that of bias, and both Castro and Risquet provide that in spades. It is also revealed in this set of writings that it was Castro's plan to turn Cuito Cuanavale into a 'symbol of resistance' - this makes it seem plausible that Fidel Castro was a source of the battle-centric narrative when pervades the subject of Cuito Cuanavale as a 'turning point' in the recent history of Southern Africa. That notwithstanding, these are two very important and highly interesting documents. Both of the men involved in their creation held great influence; Fidel Castro as the President of Cuba for more than three decades, and Jorge Risquet as a founding member of the Cuban Communist Party as well as a figure who served the Cuban government in multiple roles including an Angolan role in the 1988 tripartite negotiations. Their positions bestowed upon them the role of authority figures who have been widely respected in sympathetic circles; as such, the narratives that these individuals have espoused have been, and will continue to be, believed by supportive audiences.

There is also an issue of relevance when we consider the Cuban perspective which somewhat inflates the position of the historian, Pierro Gleijeses, and that is the lack of access by the public to Cuban archival documents. So far as it has been possible to establish, Pierro Gleijeses is the only historian who has had the privilege of being given access to a limited run of the relevant Cuban archives, which he describes in his acknowledgements in *Conflicting Missions* as having being facilitated by none other than Jorge Risquet. Although Gleijeses has not written in the same depth about the 'battle of Cuito Cuanavale' as he has about Cuba's policies and interventions in Africa, he does provide a sound and detailed version of Cuba's intervention during the SADF's Operation Savannah in Angola. This provides the reader with a glimpse into the Cuban archives, albeit a heavily pro-Cuban account. The pro-Cuba slant is demonstrated amply by the absence of any acknowledgement of negative outcomes or of mixed factors in the experience of Cuban intervention. For Castro and Risquet, willing Cubans were happy to help Africans through high levels of motivation and sacrifice. On the other hand, it is probably much easier to credit SADF intelligence reports which claim that Cuban soldiers grew increasingly disillusioned and ended up facing a similar experience to the cynicism and weariness of American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Predictably, this factor is never mentioned by Castro

when discussing Cuba's reasoning for entering into negotiations. Gleijeses, too, steers clear of any critical weighing-up of the Cuban war effort.

A further author who could be considered a part of this narrative is Isaac Saney, in his article titled, 'African Stalingrad'. Saney adopts the battle-centric narrative of a sweeping victory and grand turning point at Cuito Cuanavale and places it into the context of the Cuban 'mission to Africa'. Saney seeks to use the notion of a regional turning point as a cause of the eventual ending of apartheid in South Africa, and as a means of promoting the Cuban government and the actions of the Cuban Communist Party. The case being made is mostly that of establishing the Cubans as an altruistic anti-colonial force in Africa. Again, Saney's narrative is one which is not without influence. Through his position at Dalhousie University in Canada, and his published books such as *Cuba: Revolution in Motion*, Saney has established himself as an authority on the intersection of Cuban and African histories.

The second sub-type of this broad narrative is that put forward by Horace Campbell, in work which has come to act as a backbone to articles and beliefs that constitute an explicit anti-SADF and pro-Cuban narrative. The figures and statistics that Campbell utilises in 'The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale' are repeated by other writers in the same camp on the basis of what appears to be complete faith in the accuracy of Campbell's scholarship. Yet, this author's particular *Siege* article could be adjudged to contain numerous errors, ranging from loaded phrasing to incorrect facts and figures, in the pursuit of a tendentious line of argument at the expense of more credible historical accuracy. Still, Campbell's articles have been widely referenced and his work is significant for this present discussion, to be taken up fully in Chapter Four. Indeed, this narrative is most noteworthy as Campbell's writings are reflected in the standard ANC interpretation of this Southern African episode.

The final sub-type of the anti-SADF/ pro-Cuban narrative is, then, that provided by the ANC itself. This takes the form of articles published by prominent ANC personalities such as Ronnie Kasrils in the recent past, and through government channels like the Parliamentary publication, *Insession*, as well as press statements. Ronnie Kasrils' views in particular are important as he has held various positions in the government, was on the National Executive Committee of the ANC from 1987-2007, served as Minister of Intelligence from 2004-2008, and has also held a position on the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party which has, of course, formed part of the ANC's tripartite alliance. Kasrils' publicly-expressed beliefs and statements could still be said to represent the main views of the party on this matter.⁷ Accordingly, his representative ANC voice is likely to have influenced the formation of beliefs on the subject of

⁷ At least it is a requirement not to speak out against your chosen party's beliefs.

Cuito Cuanavale and the 'Border War' in general. The inclusion of *Insession* and a complementing ANC statement from March 2008 serves to illustrate the similarities between the ANC government's official stance and that of the individual voice of Ronnie Kasrils.

This study has expressly not included the more 'tub-thumping' standpoints backing the SADF which are associated with popular authors aligned with the old defence force. Similarly, care has been taken in the case of the counter-narratives to the pro-SADF readings. By and large, the authors included are respected. Thus, as stated previously, the literature chosen for the interpretative core of this topic has been selected chosen for its influence and regular appearance as scholarly citations.

Context

Introduction

The 'Border War' as a whole and the Republic of South Africa's actions in Angola should not be seen as an isolated military attempt at the destabilisation of a neighbouring state. Instead, the border war ought to be viewed as part of an intricate web of events connected by global and domestic politics, affected heavily by the Cold War's effect on late-decolonisation in Southern Africa. As such, this chapter will try to provide the wider anti-communist context of South Africa's Border War, up to the military planning of its Operation Modular, which signals what some commentators have called "the final phase" of South Africa's involvement in Angola.

The Cold War and newly independent states

The era of 'decolonisation' set in motion a difficult precedent for the future of parts of Africa, for it heralded a future in which violent coups and overthrows would become the *modus operandi* for political change. This was in part due to the hurried manner in which European imperialist powers pulled out of Africa, as when in one state a colonial power could commence moving out, that rapid transition could create a sense of expectation and urgency within neighbouring states. At times, this edgy expectation teetered particularly dangerously, as when the processes of decolonisation slowed, rising popular expectation could turn to violence.¹ An example of that might be the January riots in the Belgian Congo in 1959, after which Brussels quickly promised independence, but on the basis of a long and slow transitional period of about fifteen years. The urgency to acquire independence created pressures which soon spiralled into mass violence and threatened the administration's ability to govern the country.² With the governing power caught on the back foot, the process of decolonisation was speeded up and the country was granted independence within four years, with little handover preparation for the troubles that would involve and a strife-torn future history of independence.³

Decolonisation in much of Africa brought into being a highly unstable system of nationalist governance, with post-colonial rulers invariably claiming that their new order of national freedom embodied the unanimous voice and will of the people. Meanwhile, the possible meaning of spreading African independence was receiving attention outside Europe. An American National Intelligence estimate concluded that the immaturity of the newly independent states and popular resentment of their former colonial rulers could cause a major

¹ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*: Havana, Washington, Pretoria. Albertyon, South Africa: Galago, 2003. pp.5

² Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 5

³ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 6

swing towards communism and an alignment with the Soviet Union. The influence of the communist bloc had supposedly gone from negligible under colonial rule to “significant” in the era of independence, which created an advantageous position for the Soviet Union as Africa was a valuable source of natural resources.⁴ In this light, Africa was now an important playing field in the Cold War as African states were now sovereign territories which could choose their own alignment and African views and interests became more important to both America and the Soviet Union. America, however, had two advantages over the Soviet Union. The first was that it was able to provide more aid than the Soviets, and the second was that its Western European allies still held residual positions of influence in many of their former colonies, and these links could be used to manoeuvre new African leaders into working by preference with America.⁵ Prime examples of this were former Francophone colonies in North Africa and in West Africa. However, this not always the case. Some of the new African states were led by radical nationalists who distrusted or hated their former colonial rulers, particularly in the Portuguese and Belgian colonies of these lesser imperial powers. In countries such as Guinea Bissau, America’s ties with and aid to Portugal heightened anti-Portuguese sentiment and pushed its growing independence movement towards alignment with the Soviet Union.⁶

The Cold War ‘scramble’ for Africa tends to paint many African conflicts with the same brush, as conflicts of ideology and of East versus West. This, though, is surely an over-simplification, and especially so when it comes to the turbulence in Southern Africa. Although the Cold War definitely affected some of what happened, we should not dismiss the independent agency of South Africa, Angola or Cuba, for the Angolan conflict was more than just a Cold War conflict.

Namibia or South West Africa

Namibia was an important aspect of the Angolan conflict, due to the MPLA’s complicit attitude to the Namibian independence movement, SWAPO. Much of the SADF’s early operations or cross-border strikes were motivated by hitting SWAPO targets that were being allowed seemingly free reign in Angola. The territory also featured prominently in the global politics of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as being central to the negotiations which eventually ended the conflict between South African and the Angolan-Cuban alliance.

Namibia was colonised originally by Germany in 1884 as a protectorate which became known in English as South West Africa (henceforth SWA). Control over SWA changed hands after Germany’s defeat in the First World War, and the Union of South Africa was assigned a Class C

⁴ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 6

⁵ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 6

⁶ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 7

mandate to administer it by the League of Nations.⁷ As such, SWA was to be governed under the segregationist laws of South Africa which would later include the laws of the Nationalist apartheid government. When the League of Nations was dissolved at the end of the Second World War and the United Nations was formed, the South African government applied to annex SWA and incorporate it into South Africa. The United Nations rejected this and instead resolved that SWA should be placed under a new “International Trusteeship System” with a view to its eventual independence. South Africa, in turn, rejected this and refused to comply. This defiance put strain on the South African – American diplomatic relationship.⁸

In order to avoid appearing ineffectual, the United Nations declared in July 1950 that the League of Nations mandate for SWA was still in effect, and that as it remained in force, South Africa would not be required to relinquish control over its neighbouring territory.⁹ This was only challenged in June 1960, when Liberia and Ethiopia announced that they would begin legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice against South Africa, claiming that Pretoria had modified the terms of its SWA mandate without the consent of the United Nations.¹⁰ After six years of deliberation, the International Court of Justice ruled that it had no power to rule on the substance of the case because Ethiopia and Liberia had no right or special interest in the legality of the SWA case. This limp ruling sparked international outrage. In due course, the United Nations General Assembly terminated South Africa’s mandate over SWA and created a council with the intention of overseeing SWA affairs. This was frustrated as South Africa remained non-compliant with the United Nations position and, without any sanctions to back it up, SWA remained under South African rule.

The gathering context of the Cold War meant that the USA, despite objecting to the international conduct of South Africa, did not wish to imperil their relationship over the contentious issue of SWA. Ultimately, a strong anti-communist presence in sub-Saharan Africa was more important to America and its ideological stance than any stigma of associating with the apartheid government.¹¹ Washington was content to mark time for as long as it was necessary – and it was able to do so for as long as SWA did not again become a flashpoint. Indeed, it was only in 1970 that the United Nations Security Council authorised the termination of South Africa’s mandate in SWA, by which all member states were instructed to no longer recognise Pretoria’s territorial rule. In 1971, the legitimacy case was brought to the International Court of Justice again and this time South Africa was ruled to be maintaining an

⁷ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?: Chester Crocker & American Policy in South Africa, Namibia & Angola, 1981-8*. Oxford: James Currey ;, 2007. pp. 10

⁸ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?*. pp. 10

⁹ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?*. pp. 11

¹⁰ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?*. pp. 11

¹¹ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?*. pp. 11

illegal occupation of the territory of Namibia.¹² Yet, once again, the ruling had no effect. South Africa remained incumbent in the territory of Namibia and the United Nations did nothing until December 1974, and again in January 1976, when it passed resolutions calling for mandatory sanctions against South Africa. The country, however, still had friends in high places and these resolutions were vetoed by America, France and Great Britain.¹³

All the while, under the yoke of South African rule the Namibian people had begun to struggle for their own independence and in the 1960s the group known as the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) emerged from various regionalised groups to fight under a single banner.¹⁴ While this independence movement was recognised by the Organization of African Unity and received aid from nearby African states, as well as having the recognised legitimacy of an office in London, the Americans were suspicious of SWAPO. America believed that SWAPO had Marxist ties and that if Namibia became independent, its leadership would mean another Soviet-aligned state on the continent. It also meant that Pretoria could count on Washington's tacit support in maintaining control over Namibia.

Yet, with apartheid South Africa growing ever more unpopular, SWA was, inevitably, becoming more and more of an international issue, in 1977, Britain, America, France, West Germany, and Canada formed the 'Contact Group of Western Nations' with the specific intention of ending the SWA crisis diplomatically.¹⁵ This group brought forward the pivotal United Nations Security Council Resolution 435 (UNSCR 435) which, once formalised, would go on to lay the international foundations for bringing about Namibian independence.¹⁶ This resolution proposed an end to SADF action in both SWA and Angola, as well as the holding of internationally supervised free elections in Namibia.

While there was much talk and some promise of action from the global diplomatic stage, within the more domestic field South African forces were fighting their Namibian enemy of SWAPO as scattered insurgents within the territory, as well as those based northwards across the border in Angola. Angola's tacit approval of SWAPO and the fact that SWAPO bases were permitted just across the Angolan border meant that the territory would become a central element in the SWA independence struggle, much as the complicating Namibian factor also helped to cause Angola's own civil war to become much more intense.

¹² Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?* pp. 11

¹³ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?* pp. 12

¹⁴ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?* pp. 12

¹⁵ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?* pp. 12

¹⁶ Davies, J. E. *Constructive Engagement?* pp. 13

Angolan Independence movements

Before embarking on a discussion about the Angolan border war, we must have a firm understanding of all the factions and their relation to one another. The Angolan political stage was crowded by three major groups the *Movimento Popular Libertacao de Angola* (henceforth the MPLA), *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (henceforth the FNLA) and *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (Henceforth UNITA).

The MPLA was formed in 1956 and was the result of a merger of parties including the umbrella Communist Party of Angola. As such, the MPLA came to be based on a communist manifesto and enjoyed ground support from the usual constituencies, ranging from the urban poor to intellectuals, and the disaffected.¹⁷ The MPLA began an armed resistance movement with the goal of independence in 1961. From the very beginning, it enjoyed some support from the Soviet Union, employing Soviet-supplied firearms in the insurrection that marked the beginning of armed resistance.¹⁸ The MPLA was led by the authoritarian figure, Augustino Neto, whose background was that of an intellectual, as were a number of Africa's first wave of post-independence leaders.¹⁹ Out of the three major resistance groups, the Portuguese viewed the MPLA as the biggest and most dangerous foe of Lisbon's rule in Angola.²⁰ The MPLA founded its military wing in 1975, called the *People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola* (henceforth FAPLA), which would act as a regular army and serve as the MPLA's military strength in the coming conflict.²¹

The FNLA was founded by Holden Roberto but it began its life under a different name, the Union of the Peoples' of Angola (UPA). Roberto's UPA held both tribal and racial policies, and strict membership requirements meant that Angolans from the wrong area, *Mestizos* (mixed heritage), and whites were not allowed membership.²² The UPA was made up of Bakongo people who lived on the Angola-Zaire border, and as such Roberto enjoyed the support of Zaire and its ruler Mobutu Sese Seko. In the same year that the MPLA declared its armed struggle (1961), Roberto ordered a group of five thousand UPA insurgents to enter Angola from the Congo and to attack all mestizos, MPLA supporters, whites, and all other assumed enemies of the Bakongo people.²³ Official reports claim that roughly two thousand whites were killed; however, Jonas Savimbi (who at the time was a lieutenant of Roberto) estimates that it was

¹⁷ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations 1969-1994*. Alberton: Galago, 1999, pp.96

¹⁸ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 96

¹⁹ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 236

²⁰ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 237

²¹ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp.242

²² Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 96

²³ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 97

more likely that two hundred were killed.²⁴ In 1962, the UPA merged with the Democratic Party of Angola and retained Roberto as its leader. The new party was called the FNLA and would form the Revolutionary Angolan Government in Exile. The OAU, with very few exceptions, recognised this movement as the only legitimate nationalist movement in Angola, ignoring the politically radical MPLA.²⁵ Due to the preceding extreme actions of the UPA, the FNLA remained the main target of Portuguese military action, encouraging Jonas Savimbi to break away and to start his own movement in 1964, called UNITA.

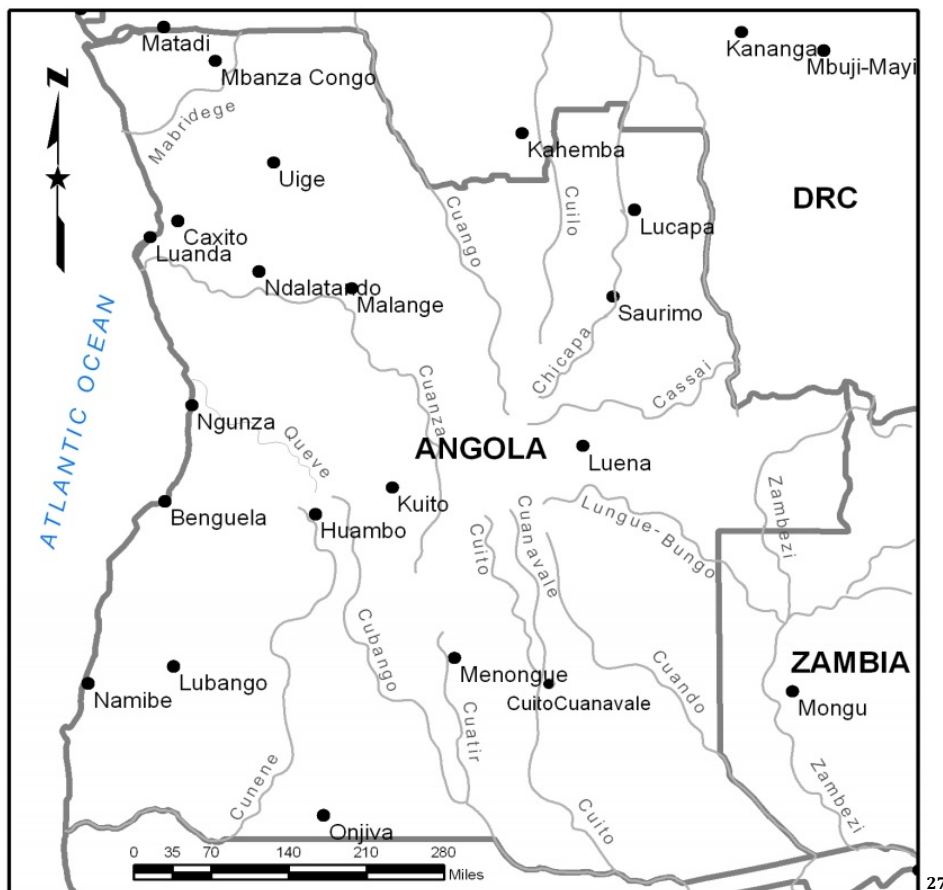
UNITA was, then, formed and led by Jonas Savimbi as a breakaway faction of the FNLA. It started as a distinct underdog and would probably have remained as such, if it had not been for Savimbi's open-handed willingness to wheel and deal. According to many sources, for instance, he even made an agreement with the Portuguese to work with them against their FNLA targets, allowing UNITA time and space to grow and to assert power. Savimbi would demonstrate his charisma and pragmatism throughout the Angolan conflict, making contacts in America and a tactical alliance with South Africa.²⁶

²⁴ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 97

²⁵ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 97

²⁶ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 97

Angola



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As already noted, outright resistance to the Portuguese in the form that eventually lead to the taking of power in Angola was only initiated in 1961, with the launch of the MPLA's armed struggle. The attempts by the various Angolan resistance movements were not enough by themselves to take power in the capital of Luanda, which was symbolically important because of the uneven spread of Lisbon's colonial rule. For although Portugal claimed control over the entire country, its rule was spread effectively only as far as it had sufficient soldiers and officials to enforce it. The resistance movements of Angola were eventually successful because of an internal metropolitan Portuguese struggle, which culminated in the 'Officers Coup' of 1974 which ousted Prime Minister Caetano and replaced him with a military junta.²⁸ The generals in charge changed the focus of the country inwards and accordingly moved swiftly towards the decolonisation of its now unwanted African dependancies. For other Portuguese colonies like

²⁷ Velthuisen, Andreas. "The Significance of the Battle for Cuito Cuanavale: Long-term Foresight of the Current Strategic Landscape." *Scientia Militaria* 37, no. 2, 107-23. doi:10.5787/37-2-71. Pp.111

²⁸ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 233

Guinea Bissau and Mozambique, this led to relatively settled dominant new alignments and allegiances in the immediate post-colonial phase. Angola, however, was a far more polarised political landscape.²⁹ There, the jockeying 'rebel' groups saw one another as rivals in a race to inevitable independence, and the fall in the 1970s of the Portuguese empire was merely a catalyst which would accelerate them into a battle with fewer external imperial distractions.

In January 1975, the rebel groups, along with Portuguese representatives, signed what was termed the Alvor agreement. Its intentions were to bring an end to the fighting between the emerging new political parties, and to pave the way to elections and a constitutive assembly in October of that year.³⁰ Until then, Angola was to be governed by a transitional government with a Portuguese figurehead. Independence would be granted once elections had been concluded, and independence day was scheduled for November 1975. The transitional government was, however, doomed to failure due to the behaviour of the heads of the three Angolan parties. Neto, Roberto, and Savimibi all became embroiled in consolidating their own political positions in the country, rather than in governing it and in sharing power.³¹ The groups also failed to honour the protocol commitments they had made as part of the Alvor agreement, with the MPLA and UNITA both lacking the following to back up their mass popularity claims, while the FNLA had sectoral interests that it was safeguarding elsewhere.³² A provisional constitution and a new electoral law was also supposed to have been drawn up by the middle of 1975, yet again none of the parties made any effort to abide by these terms of the Alvor agreement.³³

Far from working together, both the MPLA and FNLA had begun stockpiling arsenals for an anticipated war. The FNLA was receiving money and supplies from the United States, which were covertly provided by the CIA.³⁴ For its part, the MPLA had turned to the Eastern Bloc, from which the Soviets supplied it with vehicles and weaponry rather than solely funding. The MPLA also turned to Cuba, an alliance which would eventually pay off exceptionally handsomely, no matter how small the beginnings of the original Cuban aid. Cuba supplied 240 military instructors to train FAPLA forces, and within four months these officers were seeing a turnover rate of 2000 troops every month.³⁵ The absence of much secrecy by the Soviets alarmed the United States, which in turn helped to facilitate an increased build-up of arms and created an interest which fed into Washington's tacit support of South Africa in SWA and its operations in Angola.

²⁹ Gleijeses, Piero. *Conflicting Missions*. pp. 233

³⁰ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 101

³¹ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 102

³² Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 102

³³ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 102

³⁴ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 102

³⁵ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 102

During 1975, violence increased dramatically as the months wore on, with fighting between the MPLA and FNLA breaking out in Luanda itself. As the MPLA made more and more gains within the city it became clear to the Portuguese that it was time to evacuate their citizens, and by October 1975, over 23,000 refugees had been airlifted out of Angola.³⁶ Other refugees, both black and white, fled to SWA to escape the war between the MPLA and FNLA. The MPLA embarked on a campaign of authoritarian political indoctrination within the areas coming under its control, suppressing FNLA opposition which it denounced as tribalism and reactionary nationalism.³⁷ By July 1975, the FNLA had been pushed out of Luanda, which then fell under MPLA control; this was followed shortly by the whole of central Angola as the MPLA pushed home its advantage.³⁸ Savimbi became worried that the MPLA would deny UNITA a chance to gain any political footing, and so pulled his movement back into the UNITA-controlled Ovambu tribal lands.

Angola and South Africa

South Africa did not get involved in Angolan hostilities only because of its own need to destroy SWAPO operations. For, in the mid-1970s, delegations of Portuguese businessmen and FNLA envoys approached Pretoria in search of support in the civil war. Although the government was unwilling initially to aid the FNLA due to its strident anti-white track record, the threatening spectre of communism in Angola outweighed its distaste for, and distrust of, the FNLA and Roberto.³⁹ Still, when it materialised, South African aid to the FNLA was not on simple terms, with much strategic discussion between political leadership, the general staff and intelligence chiefs, before aid was given. At the same time, the B.J. Vorster administration decided to start hedging its bets, and communications were also opened with Jonas Savimbi, viewed as a moderate conservative by comparison to Roberto.⁴⁰ However, before South African officials had been able to conclude anything with Savimbi, the cabinet voted, under the strong influence of the Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, to follow a path of support for the FNLA to fight the perceived communist threat posed by the MPLA. The possibility of further aid for UNITA was left as an afterthought.⁴¹ This move signified an emerging rift in Pretoria's high politics, with clear B.J. Vorster and P.W. Botha camps appearing to coalesce. Vorster's close political ally in Intelligence, Hendrik van den Bergh, had met with Savimbi and had vigorously supported aid to UNITA rather than to the FNLA. Botha's power was, however, a dominant factor, and he and the army's generals believed that van den Bergh held too much influence over the Prime

³⁶ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 103

³⁷ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 103

³⁸ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 103

³⁹ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 104

⁴⁰ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 104

⁴¹ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 105

Minister. The SADF scenario for checking regional communism was to aid anti-communist forces as widely as possible to ensure that left-wing forces occupied the least amount of territory by Angolan Independence Day.

Aid to the FNLA did not only come from South Africa. The United States had been cosseting the pro-capitalist Mobutu Sese Seko in neighbouring Zaire for roughly a decade, but when world copper prices tumbled in the 1970s to the detriment of Zaire's economy, Mobutu blamed the market crisis on America, souring relations between the two states. To try to regain favour with Mobutu, Washington began funding the FNLA, which had always been a 'pet project' of Mobutu's after Roberto had married into his family.⁴² Aid to the FNLA was funnelled through the CIA with the aim of bolstering its fighting position. What the United States desired was not necessarily to see the FNLA win the civil war, given the waywardness of Holden Roberto, but rather to ensure that it would end up placed in a favourable position which would ensure Washington's ability to exercise some influence in a future Angolan government.⁴³ The CIA also requested that the South African intelligence agency, the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) offer support to FNLA in the form of recruiting mercenaries to aid Roberto.⁴⁴ At the same time, CIA operatives also soon discovered that UNITA was in fact better armed, better supported, and had greater numbers than the FNLA, and soon the CIA was also supplying UNITA with weapons, vehicles and other equipment.⁴⁵ The stage was being set for a particularly messy round of armed conflict.

South Africa's first major intervention, or Angolan interference, was in August 1975 at Calueque. The Republic, working with Portugal, had earlier constructed a Ruacana power plant on the SWA – Angola border for the production of power on either side. When troops who had been defending the Angolan side of the Ruacana facility were withdrawn as part of the evacuation of Portuguese nationals in July 1975, the plant was left undefended.⁴⁶ Pretoria immediately drew up plans to station soldiers in Angola to protect the South African interest in the Ruacana hydro-electric plant. In the event, it was UNITA which turned out to be a threat as in August 1975 its forces began to bar South African technicians from gaining access to the plant. Concerned by the possibility of a hostage-type situation, Pretoria took a snap decision to send an infantry force across the border to Calueque to secure the plant.⁴⁷ On 10 August, the 2 SAI (South African Infantry) crossed into Angola and engaged UNITA forces, after which it

⁴² Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 105

⁴³ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 105

⁴⁴ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 105

⁴⁵ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 106

⁴⁶ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 107

⁴⁷ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 107

moved into Calueque which had until then been occupied by a FNLA contingent which withdrew in confusion.⁴⁸

South Africa also began training FNLA forces within Angola in August 1975, in a joint deal with the CIA which had promised weapons for the FNLA as long as South African trained the FNLA soldiers.⁴⁹ Commandant Jan Breytenbach was flown from Pretoria, along with a few officers, and fulfilled South Africa's side of the deal. The purported CIA weapons, however, failed to arrive. Whilst FNLA soldiers were being trained, UNITA's requests for South African aid had finally been accepted and South African forces were now already aiding UNITA in its struggle against the MPLA. This was aggravating the foreign policy dissension in National Party politics. On the one hand, the generals, along with their Minister of Defence, wanted to escalate action in Angola and to send armoured units across the border. On the other, Van den Bergh and Vorster felt that South Africa should avoid any further escalation of its still token cross-border military presence.⁵⁰ Notwithstanding such division of opinion, and disagreement over authorisation, armoured vehicles arrived in Angola from across the SWA border.

On 15 October, South Africa launched its first official intervention, code-named Operation Savannah⁵¹. Jan Breytenbach's FNLA detachment was assigned to the lead with some SADF specialist backing, and spent over a month crossing Angola, clearing FAPLA forces out of towns and strongholds as they made their way towards Luanda.⁵² The most notable aspect about Operation Savannah is that Breytenbach's force suffered very few casualties (or at least reportedly very few) whilst inflicting heavy losses to FAPLA forces. Once Luanda was in sight, the South African command began preparing for an invasion and occupation, a move which it was estimated would require 1500 South African servicemen to enter Angola to assist in taking the capital. This, however, did not transpire. Pretoria's ruling politicians were reluctant to have to deal with the inevitable publicity around any South African deaths in a foreign country.

A further difficulty was that a large Cuban contingent had now joined the MPLA to defend Luanda, and this complication was just too great for Operation Savannah to remain viable for Pretoria. The South Africans had also concluded that neither UNITA nor the FNLA had the capacity to maintain control over the city in the event of it being captured for them.⁵³ Accordingly, Savannah ground to a halt with the lights of Luanda virtually within view.

⁴⁸ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 108

⁴⁹ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 109

⁵⁰ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 113

⁵¹ The archival documents to Operation Savannah at the SANDF Military Archive remain heavily classified. Most information on this operation is based on first-hand accounts provided by soldiers such as Cmdt. Jan Breytenbach.

⁵² Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 116

⁵³ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 119

Breytenbach's force, according to the final tally had lost only five men (merely one of them South African) and had sustained about forty wounded (of whom half were South African). Despite not attaining its ultimate objective, Operation Savannah did not amount to a military defeat. Rather, its significance lay in providing a precedent for politics playing a vital role in military actions, a crucial factor which would become ever more important as the stakes in Angola climbed higher.

November 1975 saw a major loss for the South Africa alliance, but more specifically for the FNLA. Holden Roberto became increasingly fixated on the idea of being in control of Luanda ahead of Independence Day, hoping to achieve enhanced legitimacy in the eyes of the OAU.⁵⁴ While the FNLA favoured a direct line of assault, its South African advisors saw danger, and suggested a less risky route of advance. But Roberto dismissed this as it would take too long for his urgent need to be on top in Luanda by the eleventh of the month. South African command decided that support for Roberto's campaign would be restricted to the provision of artillery, which should avoid any SADF casualties.⁵⁵ As had been foreseen, when FNLA soldiers advanced they were cut down by heavy fire from entrenched Cuban and MPLA forces. Roberto's surviving troops fled down a path that would become known in FNLA folklore as 'the death road'. This was the last major effort from the battered FNLA. From this point onwards, the Angolan conflict would begin to be one of UNITA and South Africa versus the MPLA and Cuba.

Although Angola's touted Independence Day had come and gone, Operation Savannah was not yet over. With a nod from America and France, and at the urgings of America, France, UNITA, and the FNLA, the SADF's objective shifted to maintaining a defensible position in Angola.⁵⁶ This new development was not to last long, however. For in December 1975, the American Senate passed the Clark Amendment which blocked aid to insurgents fighting in Angola, with the implicit purpose of ending SADF intrusion and action in the embattled state.⁵⁷ This was a message to the Republic that the United States would no longer maintain even clandestine support of its government's cross-border practices and decisions. Still, it was not without some qualification. Washington still requested that South African hold off on a withdrawal until January 1976, in the hope that the OAU would condemn the Cuban intervention in Angola and thus ease some of the pressure over South Africa's territorial presence there.

⁵⁴ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 125

⁵⁵ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. pp. 125

⁵⁶ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 20

⁵⁷ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 20

The OAU, however, given its unremitting hostility towards the apartheid state, came down in favour of the MPLA and recognised it as the legal Angolan government, ignoring the notion of creating a government of national unity as had been envisaged in the long-defunct Alvor agreement.⁵⁸ This support for the MPLA weakened the status of the FNLA and UNITA, and made external aid to both these factions less desirable. With this, the first South African withdrawal from Angola began. Globally, the Republic no longer had much of a leg on which to stand and, yielding to circumstances, found itself having to withdraw for political reasons.

The SADF, and the government, showed throughout this period of the Angolan war that they were able to learn from their mistakes in the field, so that Operation Savannah came to be a major learning curve. Henceforward, operations were to be planned with an explicit political dimension, bringing such SADF policy developments as the programmatic introduction of Total Onslaught. Total Onslaught would see the introduction of a multi-faceted approach to warfare, including psychological, political, economic and diplomatic planks.⁵⁹ Within SWA, this also ushered in a new SADF policy of Winning Hearts And Minds (WHAM). Its generalship had learnt from Operation Savannah that successful operations required required securing and maintaining full political support across a wide front. Operation Savannah had also revealed that a lingering hold upon territory was also not an effective strategy in clandestine operations. In response, commanders such as General Constand Viljoen devised a new South African military doctrine based around mobile warfare. In future operations, the objective would not be centred around maintaining territorial position, but would be that of concentrating on the moving about of small strike forces, and enabling their accompanying allied insurgents to control their new territorial gains.⁶⁰ Lastly, the setback of Operation Savannah also speeded up new weapons research. Future operations would be conducted with increasingly advanced fighting technologies such as the highly-accurate G5 artillery gun, the modernised Oliphant battle tank, and the fast Ratel armoured vehicle.⁶¹

From the end of Operation Savannah until 1985, South Africa shifted its focus back to SWA and the problem of its SWAPO adversary. The issue for Pretoria in its counter-insurgency campaign was the SWAPO presence in Angola and its ability to conduct cross-border raids into SWA, unchecked by FAPLA and with the seeming support of the MPLA. Support for the movement was growing steadily within SWA, as its military actions were becoming more effective. This SWAPO strengthening was playing out against the backdrop of UNSCR Resolution 435. If it continued to grow in popular support and to gain in momentum, SWAPO would have

⁵⁸ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 20

⁵⁹ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 38

⁶⁰ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 41

⁶¹ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 45

increased sway in the negotiations, an international resolution to the Namibian crisis to which South Africa had already resigned itself.⁶² As such, South Africa had to curb SWAPO's influence in order to get the best possible outcome for its interests in a free SWA election.⁶³ Thus, operations up to the mid-1980s - even when conducted inside Angola - were targeted at SWAPO and at maintaining political order within its contested South African territory. Angola would only resurface as an important regional factor when the MPLA had gathered sufficient strength to pose a renewed threat to South Africa's old ally, UNITA.

Angolan affairs came to the boil again in 1985, when FAPLA forces began the first of many pushes to take UNITA strongholds in southern Angola to try to eliminate its opponent, striking across the Cuito River at Savimbi's UNITA headquarters at Jamba.⁶⁴ With UNITA forces too weak to repel a FAPLA assault, its leader had no alternative but to turn to South Africa. This faced Pretoria with an immediate dilemma. Aiding UNITA would be in contravention of international agreement and risked South Africa getting sucked into Angola's continuing civil war. Any South African deaths in Angola would be domestically controversial and could also jeopardise the ever fragile diplomatic détente surrounding SWA. On the other hand, should UNITA be wiped out South Africa would lose an ally, as it had been assisting the SADF against SWAPO.⁶⁵ After meeting with Savimbi, Jannie Geldenhuys bit the bullet and authorised SADF aid to UNITA, and then successfully repelled the FAPLA offensive. UNITA then seemed to be on a lucky streak, as in February 1986 Ronald Reagan announced a new blanket doctrine of aid to all those fighting "Soviet-aggression" and, soon enough, the Clark Amendment which had ended ties to UNITA was repealed. Covert aid to Savimbi's camp was immediately resumed. 1986 also saw FAPLA attempt to repeat its 1985 assault but, strengthened by its newly-regained alliances, UNITA was able to push FAPLA back and even to raid the town of Cuito Cuanavale.

South Africa was now in a position to back UNITA more openly than before, which would help directly in its offensives against SWAPO. Yet, the continuing frequency of FAPLA offences against UNITA was worrying. It was in this troubled context that the SADF would escalate its Angolan involvement, with the aim of crippling FAPLA, and of aiding UNITA in controlling the insecure southern border.

⁶² Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 68

⁶³ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 68

⁶⁴ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 243

⁶⁵ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 244a

Chapter One

Operation Modular phase one – The South African Defence Force.

The 1985 FAPLA offensive is a key aspect in understanding the motives and objectives of the SADF during the border war. This Angolan groupings' repeated attempts to wipe out UNITA presented South Africa with the possibility of destruction of an ally. The almost annual nature of these attacks eventually informed the objectives behind the SADF escalation in Angola: the South Africans needed to remove FAPLA's ability to keep renewing its assaults. Although the 1985 assault was the first of the concerted attempts to wipe out UNITA, it is not as central to the border war narratives as the fateful offensive of 1987. This chapter will begin by briefly highlighting the run-up to and executing of the MPLA's Second Congress, placing it within the pro-SADF narrative of the border war and considering sources for this version of events. It touches on a fair degree of detail on aspects which are not necessarily directly pertinent, but the information furnished is valuable in establishing a credible narrative which helps to explain the SADF mentality and actions in Angola. Considerable reliance is placed on the valuable historical record of Commandant Johannes von Moltke.

The overall failure¹ of Operation Savannah in 1975 caused South Africa's attention to shift from providing full support and backing to UNITA, to small scale limited support which would enable Savimbi's men to turn towards more guerrilla-style tactics.² South African assistance gradually increased between 1975 and 1985, enabling UNITA to develop a significant conventional force. This force numbered 30,000 "trained"³ fighters, making UNITA a substantial contender again in Angola's political sphere. UNITA's troop size provided the organisation with the influence to maintain control over the southeastern portion of Angola, from the Cuito River to the country's border, with its main headquarters fixed at Jamba.⁴ As South African influence within UNITA expanded, it became all the more critical that all operations, especially once the

¹ It would be difficult to classify the military operations of 32 Battalion as a failure.

² South African National Defence Force Military Intelligence Archive, Pretoria, J.F Huyser Collection, Box 30, by Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular Phase one: May -October 1987. Pp 3.

³ Many South African reports describe UNITA soldiers as inept.

⁴ Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp.4

SADF had arrived 'in person' to back Savimbi's force, were presented as UNITA-led operations, such that it would not appear as if South Africa was operating across its borders.⁵

Meanwhile, FAPLA had also done some consolidation since its losses from Operation Savannah, which had seen FAPLA lose control of many of its strongholds throughout the country. Upon regaining its footholds, FAPLA went to work to fortify these locations to strengthen its defences in the event of further SADF intervention.⁶ Aid from the Soviet Union was ramped up heavily during this period, including sophisticated aviation equipment such as MiG-23 fighter jets capable of combating the SADF Mirage fighters, and further hedging against SADF air superiority, should it return.⁷ 1984 saw the first attempt at rooting out UNITA from its territories in the South East, but FAPLA forces were met by heavy resistance that they had not planned on, and the assault then changed targets, seeking faster and easier penetration. Soon enough, FAPLA pulled back and instead prepared at the town of Cuito Cuanavale on the west bank of the Cuito River. A result of this failure was the swift posting of Soviet officers and FAPLA's regional HQ to take control of tactical planning and operations, as well as an increased flow of weaponry and supplies.⁸ Under Soviet guidance, a new operation was designed in order to remove UNITA from its foothold, utilising twenty brigades (ranging in individual size between 1500-4000 men), which were comprised of a combination of FAPLA brigades, one SWAPO brigade, and five UMKHONTO WE SIZWE brigades (drawn from the armed wing of the African National Congress).⁹ This force was split into two prongs, one comprising of nine brigades which would strike at Cazombo in order to draw UNITA's strength away from its HQ.¹⁰ The second, numbering eleven brigades, would advance towards the Lomba River and then strike at Mavinga, which would provide a springboard for an attack on the UNITA HQ at Jamba.¹¹

Savimbi fell for this diversion, and moved his strength to Cazombo, believing it to be the main objective of FAPLA movements. But as soon as he had completed his troop movements, the FAPLA forces at Lomba sprang into action and advanced on Mavinga.¹² UNITA was left with no options, as should Mavinga fall, it would lose its entire base of operations in Angola. Predictably,

⁵ Scholtz, Leopold. "The South African Strategic And Operational Objectives In Angola, 1987-88." *Sci.Mil. Scientia Militaria - South African Journal of Military Studies*, 2011. Pp. 80

⁶ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations 1969-1994*. Alberton: Galago, 1999. Pp 530

⁷ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 530, Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals: The untold story of South Africa's apartheid-era military generals*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001. pp 81

⁸ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 530., Breytenbach, Jan. *The Buffalo Soldiers : The Story of South Africa's 32-Battalion 1975-1993*. Alberton: Galago, 2002. pp. 248

⁹ Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 530

¹⁰ Nortje, Piet. *32 Battalion: The inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2003. pp. 221

¹¹ Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 82

¹² Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 531

Savimbi then turned to the South Africans yet again, pleading the gravity of his imperilled position. At a political level, there is much to suggest that Pretoria was wary of intervening on UNITA's behalf, after the outcomes of Savannah¹³. Peter Stiff notes that this was a response from governing politicians although not from their generals¹⁴, a view which is echoed by the accounts of General George Meiring¹⁵, but it remains interesting to observe that authorisation was provided quickly by the State Security Council.¹⁶ Within two days of its meeting, the South African Air Force (SAAF) was already bombing FAPLA positions in Angola, as well as ferrying UNITA troops from Cazombo to Mavinga in order to try to remedy their earlier strategic error.¹⁷

Stiff attributes the checking of the MPLA's Second Congress resolution on a more forceful military push against Angolan opposition to effective SAAF bombing runs which wiped out large portions of the enemy brigades. Meiring, in his account to the journalist, Hilton Hamann, takes a contrary view, asserting that the transportation of UNITA forces back to Mavinga in time was the real basis of defensive success.¹⁸ Regardless, the FAPLA offensive was broken before Mavinga, and its surviving brigades were forced to withdraw back across the Cuito River. The South Africans, however, were unable to officially celebrate a victory as their presence in Angola was supposed to be secret. Thus, UNITA took the credit for halting FAPLA, despite having officially lost control over Cazombo which they were unable to adequately defend at the same time as defending the strategically more important position at Mavinga.¹⁹

FAPLA's failure to secure its primary objective of Mavinga did not, however, dishearten the MPLA president, Eduardo dos Santos. If anything, he concluded that South Africa had played the limits of its hand. The stealthy nature of its aid to UNITA suggested that international pressures on Pretoria were too great for any full scale intervention in Angola, and thus if the assault were to be repeated, it seemed unlikely that the SADF would again come to the aid of UNITA and run the increased risk of being identified as an illegal expeditionary force in Angolan territory.²⁰ Equally, not all of FAPLA's losses contained some silver lining for its enemy. Political twists and turns within the MPLA prompted the Reagan administration to openly declare support for UNITA when the MPLA refused United States mediation in the civil war, and also refused to see

13 Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 14,

14 Stiff, Peter. The Silent War. Pp 531,

15 Hamann, Hilton. Days of the Generals. pp 83

16 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp.5, Scheepers, Marius. Striking Inside Angola With 32 Battalion. Solihull, West Midlands: Helion & Company Limited, 2012. pp.119

Breytenbach, J. The Buffalo Soldiers. Pp. 273

17 Hamann, Hilton. Days of the Generals. pp 83-84

18 Stiff, Peter. The Silent War. Pp 532, Hamann, Hilton. Days of the Generals. pp 84.

Steenkamp, Willem. South Africa's Border War 1966-1989. Gibraltar: Ashanti Publishing, 1989. pp. 136

19 Stiff, Peter. The Silent War. Pp 532.

20 Stiff, Peter. The Silent War. Pp 532

to a Cuban withdrawal from the country. With Washington's support for UNITA came the shipment of more sophisticated weaponry.²¹ To make matters worse for the MPLA, Moscow had also begun to have second thoughts about the levels of its commitment to its Third World allies; with domestic economic and other strains starting to hurt the Soviet Union, under Yuri Andropov's rule the communist party began to back away from expenditure on outside Marxist movements.²² Moscow did, however, dispatch General Konstantin Shagonvitch to Angola in December 1985 to take charge of all FAPLA forces, and he immediately began preparing for another drive against UNITA.²³

Upon learning of a forthcoming renewed assault, Savimbi shifted gears, changing from a defensive to an offensive strategy, as well as adopting the South African approach of mobile warfare and hit-and-run tactics.²⁴ Hamann, again, suggests that Savimbi was also well aware of the uncertain ability of the SADF to intervene on his behalf again so soon. With that in mind, UNITA began planning an assault on Cuito Cuanavale without informing the SADF.^{25,26} UNITA's infantry assault on the town of Cuito Cuanavale was nonetheless given artillery backing from the SADF's 32 Battalion which had remained in Angola on the off-chance that conventional warfare broke out.²⁷ UNITA's attack on Cuito failed, although the availability of 32 Battalion artillery caused sufficient damage to the defenders to dissuade FAPLA from any immediate retaliatory assault on UNITA.²⁸ The failed infantry assault revealed that UNITA did not have the ground force to overcome FAPLA.

In response, UNITA began a joint planning program with the SADF and devised and adopted a new strategy for continued action against the MPLA's army. New objectives included ensuring an optimal concentrates on a guerrilla modus operandi by March 1987, preventing FAPLA from conventionally threatening key UNITA strongholds in its southeastern territories, and neutralising FAPLA's conventional offensive capabilities by the early months of 1988.²⁹ Joint planning for the first of these three objectives was completed in December of 1986. However, soon afterwards the relationship between UNITA and South Africa began to deteriorate as the

21 Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 532, Steenkamp, Willem. *South Africa's Border War* pp. 138

22 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 84. Steenkamp, Willem. *South Africa's Border War* pp. 138

23 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 85

24 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 85

25 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 86

26 Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 535

27 Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 535, Steenkamp, Willem. *South Africa's Border War* pp. 138

28 Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 5

29 Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 6

Savimbi leadership began to suspect that the SADF was trying to assume too great a command of its campaigning.³⁰

This souring of relations meant that planning for the second and third objectives did not happen. Moreover, despite evidence of an imminent FAPLA assault in March 1987, UNITA refused to accept that it would require SADF assistance in halting an enemy advance.³¹ This cooling of the relationship is not well represented in SADF histories. These resort to contradictory accounts which suggest that South Africa did not wish to get politically involved in Angola during this period³² (although they already were), or which convey the views of generals who suggested – cryptically – that hanging fire would be in the interest of conserving power for greater battles which might yet be coming³³. In his addressing of the relationship between South Africa and UNITA, Hilton Hamman focuses on the interpersonal relationships between Savimbi and senior SADF generals such as General Jannie Geldenhuys who, reportedly, had little regard for Savimbi when it came to business.³⁴ The case being made is for irreconcilable temperaments or personalities as a decisive element.

Interestingly, Fred Bridgland attributes the FAPLA build-up and holding to a decision not to commence an operation which could have seen 32 Battalion assault the bridge over the Cuito River with the prospect of its destruction, rather than to any deterioration of the UNITA-Pretoria relationship.³⁵

The links between UNITA and South Africa were restored by April 1987, but the damage caused by their brief alienation was considerable. FAPLA had been given plenty of time to stockpile arms and reinforcements at Cuito Cuanavale, undoing the losses that had been inflicted upon it in the UNITA-SADF raid on the town, and going further in building a stronger force.³⁶ At the same time, though, the planned assault was creating division within FAPLA and its allies. The FAPLA generals, for a start, did not believe that their forces had sufficient training, as they were mostly young conscripts who would be pitted against battle-hardened UNITA soldiers, even if the SADF did not intervene as additional muscle - which was a distinct possibility.³⁷ Forces outside of the FAPLA leadership were, however, a motivating factor – the political leadership in Luanda was facing serious economic pressure, burdened by the costs of a

30 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 88

31 Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 6

32 Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 544

33 Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 249

34 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 88

35 Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 27

36 Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 7, Nortje, Piet. *32 Battalion*. Pp. 233

37 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 86

civil war which was sparking unrest among its own supporters. FAPLA's losing streak was also not helping the spirits of its MPLA following: Luanda needed positive war news, and required a victory to rally its constituency.³⁸

This view was shared by Moscow, and in particular by General Shagnovitch who had been planning an offensive to obliterate UNITA since his December 1985 arrival in Angola.³⁹ However, this push for action created tension between Moscow and Havana. Castro and his advisors did not believe that any assault on UNITA would be successful until it could be guaranteed that the SADF would not intervene. Fidel Castro himself claims that this advice was heeded after 1985, but that it was ignored "by those who advised such operations"⁴⁰ in 1987, whatever the accuracy of Cuba's misgivings over the outcome.⁴¹ The Cuban leadership in the field in Angola also believed that a single assault of this planned magnitude was a grave mistake, as it would allow the SADF, should it intervene, to break FAPLA with one decisive operation.⁴² Shagnovitch, though, got his way, and the offensive against UNITA strongholds began to move forward. Under protest, the Cubans declined to commit any of their soldiers to the action, although they did assign thirty-five specialist advisors.⁴³ With the offensive scheduled for its eventual commencement in August 1987, South Africa busied itself with preparations for the aiding of UNITA.

Close liaison teams were set up between UNITA and the SADF to try to ease coordination, including bringing the Savimbi group into planning from which it had previously felt left out. A jointly-compiled intelligence report suggested a looming FAPLA offensive before the end of the year. Once again, the assault was calculated to be two-pronged, originating from two areas, Lucusse and Cuito Cuanavale. Intelligence also correctly identified the Lucusse force as a diversionary tactic, and efforts were put in to focusing on the force across the Cuito River.⁴⁴ In anticipation, the SADF began a long planning cycle, detailing possibilities and eventualities, their outcomes, and the most viable courses of action. A working document, "OP MODULER BEPLANNING: SAW DEELNAME AAN OPERASIES TER ONDERSTEUNING VAN UNITA IN DIE SESDE MILITERE STREEK"^{45,46}, was produced as a framework for discussion within the SADF

38 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 86

39 Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*. Pp 535

40 A clear reference to Shagnovich and Moscow.

41 "Paying Our Debt to Humanity." In *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia*, edited by David Deutschmann, by Fidel Castro, 1. Melbourne, Vic., Australia: Ocean Press, 1989.

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42 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 87

43 Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals*. pp 87

44 Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 7

45 As Issued by C Army HQ on the 11th of June 1987.

46 Rough Translation to English: Op. Modular planning: SAW participation in operations in support of UNITA in the sixth military region.

about its available options in providing support to UNITA. The overall objective was clearly defined as: “To halt the 1987 FAPLA offensive in the Sixth Military Region”.⁴⁷ At this stage, the plan had four possible methods of attaining this southern Angola objective. These were, in summary:

Option One. The SADF’s involvement remains on a clandestine level, with the responsibility for the stopping of FAPLA’s offensive resting squarely with UNITA. Only limited SADF support in the form of liaison teams, Special Forces anti-tank teams, a unit for fire support, infantry of 32 Battalion and a clandestine communications and transport air support to be committed, even in the eventuality of Mavinga falling to the enemy.⁴⁸

Option Two. Clandestine support (as in Option One) continues. But the FAPLA brigades are attacked on the march in offensive fashion by open SADF involvement, via offensive air strikes, attacks by a mechanised group and/or 32 Bn with sufficient fire support, infrastructural targets not to be attacked, and the area of action restricted to approximately 30 kilometres from Cuito.⁴⁹

Option Three. The FAPLA offensive is delayed by actions such as described in Option One and Two, but the enemy nevertheless succeeds in capturing Mavinga. In this case, an aggressive approach is followed to make the situation for the enemy in Mavinga untenable, involving air strikes and the deployment of 32 Battalion and 61 Mechanised Battalion Group in an eventual attack on Mavinga itself with a view to recapturing it from the enemy.⁵⁰

Option Four. This contingency entails a surprise SAAF offensive against infrastructural targets in southern Angola, including attacks on the FAPLA air bases at Menongue and Lubango. After a favourable air situation has been created in this Sixth Military Region, a coordinated infantry and armour offensive by ground forces is launched against Cuito Cuanavale with a view to handing the town over to UNITA for permanent occupation.⁵¹

These options were accompanied by recommendations on a preferred primary course of action. Option Four was dismissed immediately due to the risks involved in frontal, open attacks

47 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 11

48 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 11 , Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 30, Nortje, Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp. 234

49 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 12 , Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 30, Nortje, Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp. 234

50 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 12 , Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 30, Nortje, Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp. 234

51 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 12 , Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 30

on targets which could incur heavy aircraft losses.⁵² Options Two and Three implied acceptance of Mavinga being lost to FAPLA forces. Given that eventuality, Option Three was viewed as preferable to Option Two at the time of tabling possibilities⁵³, but ultimately Option One was the preferred path of making progress.⁵⁴ After deliberations by general staff in June 1987, the decision was reached that a combination of Options One and Two would be the best method of aiding UNITA.⁵⁵ Clearly, the SADF wished to avoid getting stuck in any Vietnam-esque circumstances of a military quagmire.

In the event, option one as recommended, was to be put into action immediately and preparations for option two began in case FAPLA presented too strong a force for UNITA with only limited clandestine aid from South Africa.⁵⁶ Political approval of the action was forthcoming, and within a week instructions for 'OP MODULER' was issued by the SADF Directorate of Operations.⁵⁷ There were, of course, political riders. P.W Botha had already denied permission for an operation to sever the Menongue - Cuito Cuanavale supply route, as he was wary of an international outcry.⁵⁸ Thus, to minimise international repercussions, the SADF would have to adhere to government guidelines. All SADF action had to be in defence of UNITA as South Africa needed to maintain a defensive image of protecting a friendly faction in Angola in case of international scrutiny.⁵⁹ Most importantly, the SADF would have to minimise its Angolan casualties; it could not conduct operations in which casualties might be unpredictable. Indeed, the safety of personnel and equipment was even given a higher priority than the overall success of the operation.⁶⁰ This was essential to the maintaining of internationally plausible deniability.⁶¹ Without SADF casualties, prisoners, or equipment, the Angolans and Cubans would be unable to conclusively show a South African presence on their territory.

Due to the covert nature of the operation in its early stages, South African forces were to be deployed in a staggered fashion. Multiple squads were kept in reserve and vehicles were held back only to be used should the situation escalate.⁶² As soon as their orders were issued, SADF

52 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 12

53 11th June 1987

54 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 12

55 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 13

56 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 13 , Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 31

57 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 13

58 Bridgland, Fred. The War for Africa. pp. 32

59 Bridgland, Fred. The War for Africa. pp. 33

60 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 15

61 Bridgland, Fred. The War for Africa. pp. 33

62 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 15

battalions assigned to Operation Modular embarked on preparation for an extended period of operational deployment.⁶³

Moduler's operational targets became clearer as planning advanced. In June 1987 SADF and UNITA intelligence found large scale troop and supply movements converging on Cuito Cuanavale, which had already been identified as the coming assault's staging ground. FAPLA had decided to use four reinforced brigade for its assault on Mavinga and to hold back another four for logistics and other tasks.⁶⁴ This would make the vanguard FAPLA brigades the priority targets of the SADF battalions to halt the attack on Mavinga, with the other four formations only becoming targets should they be moved forward as reinforcements.

FAPLA activity also hastened further joint planning between the SADF and UNITA, centred on speedy action to maximise their chances of crushing their enemy's offensive. It was decided that another regular SADF battalion was to be deployed in Angola, but further west from Mavinga, to lift any pressures on UNITA and SADF forces there should FAPLA advance on another front. Officers were moved around to assist in preparations and to strengthen the command chain of troops in various locations. Crucially, it was also decided that immediately after the opening of the FAPLA offensive, a SADF squad would destroy the bridge over the Cuito River.⁶⁵ Known as Operation Coolidge, this action took place in the last week of August 1987 but turned out to be only partially effective in that it failed to bring down the bridge completely.⁶⁶ Still, as what was left was no longer crossable by tanks and other heavily vehicles, the operation had accomplished its essential tactical objective.

The Coolidge 'success' has been somewhat downplayed by Romer-Heitman, who observes that the bridge was only out of order temporarily until it could be repaired, and that supply lines had in any event not been cut off as the means of moving supplies across the river could be changed to airlifting.⁶⁷ That view notwithstanding, even this early on in the conflict the town of Cuito Cuanavale was coming to play a large role in the Angolan affairs of the SADF. Although the bridge over the Cuito river was the first part of an apparent strategic fascination, it was also not

63 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 15, Nortje, Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp. 235

64 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 16, South African National Defence Force Military Intelligence Archive, Pretoria, J.F Huyser Collection, Box 30. Major W Dorning. *A personal impression of Op MODuler (phase one) based on a visit to 20 brigade forward-HQ over the period of 19-30 september 1987.* Appendix A to the History of OP Modular (phase one).

Steenkamp, Willem. South Africa's Border War. Pp. 150

65 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 17, Steenkamp, Willem. South Africa's Border War pp. 151

66 Stiff, Peter. The Silent War. Pp 547, Steenkamp, Willem. South Africa's Border War pp. 151

67 Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 42

the last. And it would assume a prominent position not only in a South African gaze. Predictably, for Fidel Castro the town would be turned into an icon of Cuba's Angolan odyssey.

SADF-UNITA joint planning also saw UNITA running harassment engagements during the build up to the FAPLA offensive and in its early stages. This tactic effectively delayed the offensive by a further two weeks, and inflicted light casualties on FAPLA before the major fighting had really begun.⁶⁸ A consequence of this very early success with running attacks was the creation of further liaison teams, and an enhanced sense of the value of working closely with UNITA.

SADF deployment came under the direction of Commandant Robbie Hartsliet, whose strategy mirrored exactly what the instructions from Pretoria had called for - defence operations to bolster UNITA's position in southern Angola. Most obviously, this involved despatching reinforcements to UNITA command at Mavinga.⁶⁹ Then, rather than simply deploying the SADF troops at Mavinga to await the arrival of the FAPLA onslaught, Hartsliet followed the SADF's mechanical warfare doctrines, and positioned his men west of Mavinga.⁷⁰ This provided his force with the ability to move about and to intercept FAPLA forces before they could hit UNITA targets, without having to maintain standing control over their territory.

This detachment was, however, a relatively small formation of soldiers. Although there were a further two SADF squadrons at the ready and waiting to move, again there was caution from Pretoria which had only authorised the utilisation of these troops should Mavinga come under direct threat.⁷¹ Here was another sign of the unwillingness of the South African government to raise its military profile in Angola, worried about international reaction and nervous about getting sucked into some Angolan version of America's messy Vietnam War. At the same time, affairs were not left to stand still. The operational phase of Modular soon got underway, with the SADF unleashed to target a FAPLA brigade positioned close to its area of deployment, in its backing of UNITA.⁷²

Commanded by Colonel Jock Harris, this force which was assigned the destruction of the Angolan brigade on 17 August, would now receive a last second boost to its strength. On 16 August, the general staff inspected the front to view the unfolding operation and to see what might be done to overcome the initial limitations of Modular. On the following day, the chief of

⁶⁸ Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 18-19

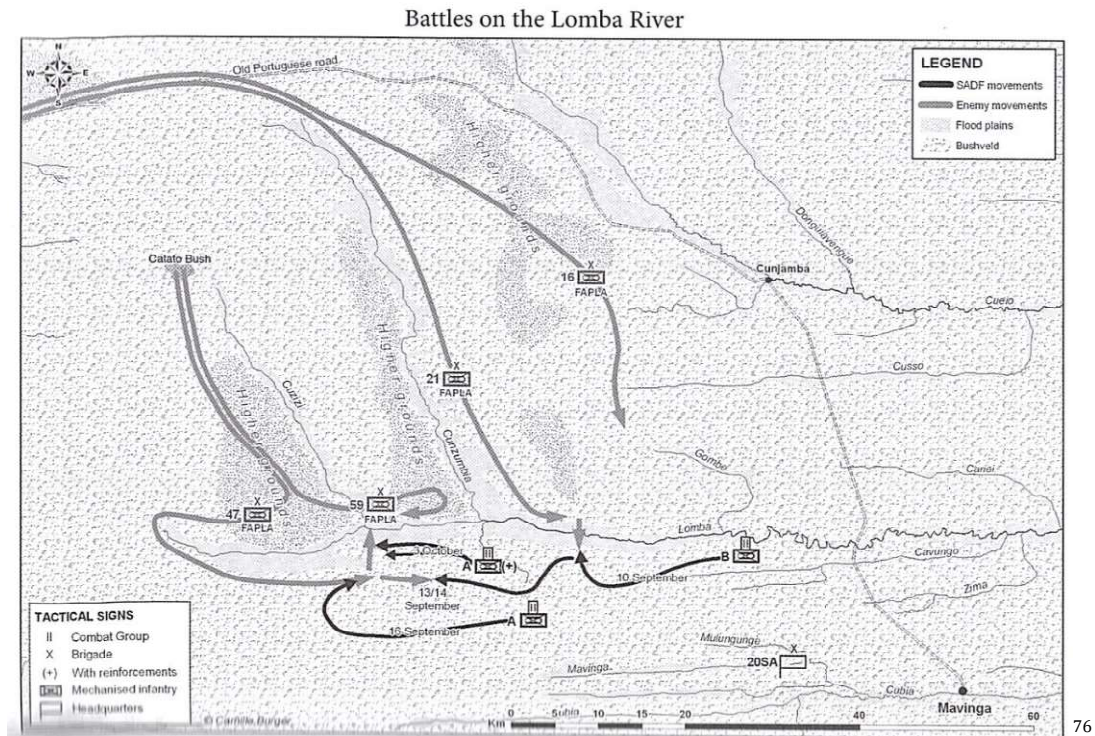
⁶⁹ Nortje, Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp. 236.

⁷⁰ Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 23

⁷¹ Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 25

⁷² Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 25

army authorised the use of the reserve squadrons in Angola.⁷³⁷⁴ In the meantime, Colonel Harris's force would also be reinforced by mobile artillery and armoured support. The SADF's 61 Mechanised Battalion, held in reserve, was, however, still kept back on the basis that it would only be deployed in the event of a wholesale routing of FAPLA forces, thereby ending any prospect of further offensives from Luanda.⁷⁵



The SADF's plans and adjustments proved timely, as FAPLA began its long-awaited insurgency into UNITA territory on 17 August.⁷⁷ This enabled its local command to put into immediate action its own measures. The only concern for Harris was that the promised reinforcements had not yet arrived, and four FAPLA brigades had already begun moving. Enemy movement was slowed by SADF artillery bombardments which bought a breathing space of several days.⁷⁸ Harris's command was then promised the arrival of artillery reinforcements in the last week of

73 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 26

74 Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 39

75 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 26

76 Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 264

77 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 26, Nortje, Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp. 236

78 Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 40

August, and the supply of troop reinforcements in the first week of September.⁷⁹ His force would then be re-positioned to meet up with his reinforcements before engaging FAPLA forces near the Lomba River.

That would involve a temporary withdrawal from the field of operations to Mavinga to attach the artillery battery before moving back out into position near the Lomba River crossings. The power of the SADF artillery which was already operating in Angola prolonged the FAPLA advance over the end of August, slowing down and inflicting casualties on two of its large brigades, and providing time for SADF reinforcements to assemble. The heavy use of artillery from protected rear positions in the early stages of Operation Modular was supposedly to help to keep up the fig-leaf image that the SADF was not involved in warfare, although the unprecedented power and accuracy of the army's G5 cannon could not have failed to arouse some suspicion of the origin of the newly-introduced firepower.⁸⁰ Accompanying this was, as noted earlier, the execution of the Coolidge intervention. FAPLA forces that had extended into UNITA territory now found themselves partially cut off from their re-supply route and were wholly cut off from any armoured reinforcements.⁸¹

There was also another favourable development for South African ground forces. For all Pretoria's political caution over Angola, the SADF itself was gradually increasing the level of its forces there. Discretionary use of the South African Air Force (SAAF) was authorised, and air support in the form of runs against FAPLA supplies and FAPLA advance columns was soon underway.⁸² The trend of creeping SADF escalation reached a peak on 28 August, when its general staff met at Rundu and decided to commit a new brigade - sized force, including a mechanised armour group, to Operation Modular.⁸³ Before the enlargement pushed through by SADF command, it seems that the forces assigned to Angola were too low in strength to achieve the goals set out for Operation Modular. It is certainly feasible that had it not been for these constant additions, it appears likely that the SADF would have suffered either unacceptably high casualties, or might even have lost all of the Republic's strategic objectives in Southern Angola.

After almost a month of slow and careful movement, FAPLA forces suddenly speeded up their oncoming assault at an alarming pace for the South Africans. On 29 August, two brigades which had until then been moving in tandem, split, with one moving west and the other heading east

⁷⁹ Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 28

⁸⁰ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 49

⁸¹ Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 32, Steenkamp, Willem. South Africa's Border War. Pp. 151

⁸² Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 33

⁸³ Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 33

along the Lomba River.⁸⁴ A further pair of brigades also diverged to move in different directions, one heading southwards, and the other continuing eastwards to the Cunjamba River which it could follow all the way to Mavinga.⁸⁵ The sudden movement by FAPLA caught the SADF unprepared for sudden action. At the same time, although the now more dispersed FAPLA brigades posed a much greater threat to Mavinga, their greater isolation from one another made them a much easier target.

The problem of FAPLA mobility was seen to by the employment of long-range G5 artillery. Cannon positioned along the Lomba River were capable of hitting all three brigades.⁸⁶ Their introduction and effectiveness 'stabilised' the situation for the SADF, and allowed for a buffer of time before the commencement of any operations against the FAPLA brigades which were closing in.⁸⁷ In this short period of relative inaction, the SADF's guidelines were re-affirmed – its role remained that of backup for UNITA to ensure that it was able to maintain its position, that it was to serve as UNITA or as its indistinguishable proxy, that it was not to follow any suspect independent agenda, and, of course, that the loss of any equipment or South African servicemen was to be fiercely guarded against.⁸⁸

The impact of SADF artillery had greatly reduced FAPLA's ability to advance and the first week of September passed with little progress.⁸⁹ The morning of 9 September would, however, see a sudden surge of activity as a FAPLA brigade managed to secure a crossing point on the Lomba river. At this point, the South African objective was to stop FAPLA from crossing the river, and all available force was brought to bear against its brigade. SADF artillery began shelling the crossing point, ahead of an assault from Hartsliet's force. This attack proved to be highly effective as it caught the FAPLA brigade in the middle of transferring vehicles across the river, destroying tanks and dissuading the force from any further movement.⁹⁰ With the additional loss of an estimated 150 FAPLA soldiers killed, the remainder of the brigade fled northwards across the Lomba flood plain. Further FAPLA efforts to cross at the same point were again scuppered by SADF firepower and, by 10 September, the situation was viewed by South African command as once again stabilised.⁹¹

84 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 34, Nortje Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp. 237

85 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 35

86 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 37

87 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 37

88 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 44

89 Breytenbach, Jan. The Buffalo Soldiers. Pp. 274, Nortje, Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp.237

90 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 51, Nortje, Piet. 32 Battalion. Pp.240

91 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 52

While this force was being battered by the SADF, it became apparent that another brigade, previously viewed as the greater approaching threat, had halted all movement and had instead entrenched itself in defence against artillery fire.⁹² The SADF assault on this formation began on 13 September. Yet, unlike the immediately preceding clash, this would not be a clean sweep for the South Africans. The FAPLA brigade had holed up in an abandoned UNITA logistics position and this holding, combined with stiff trench defences, made it heavy going for the enemy's assaulting armour. The SADF could not commit to a potentially costly battle, and the force was ordered to withdraw, returning later to retrieve abandoned vehicles, as well as the bodies of some of its soldiers. This battle showed just how firm was the political policy of no casualties. The SADF withdrew after losing eight dead (only four of whom were "European", who were what counted most in the government's political calculation).⁹³⁹⁴ This figure was in stark contrast to FAPLA losses, estimated to have been between 250-300 FAPLA soldiers killed.⁹⁵ The final outcome, then, was mixed. Although the SADF withdrew from combat, its FAPLA enemy also pulled back and abandoned its attempt to join up with another brigade further along the river. Thus, the SADF had made gains. FAPLA brigades remained isolated and vulnerable to strikes. And their failure to establish a bridgehead over the Lomba meant that they would be unable to create a staging ground for the original planned advance on Mavinga.⁹⁶

The rest of September 1987 would see the SADF fighting a "war of attrition" against FAPLA, rather than making grand operational movements – there was monitoring of its brigade movements and regular shelling. This tactic proved extremely effective, as it inflicted heavy casualties at no expense to SADF manpower, restricted the movement of FAPLA brigades, weakened their morale, and made it difficult for these forces to re-supply nearby units in need.⁹⁷ Not short of confidence, by the end of September 1987 South African intelligence calculated that enemy forces were operating at only a third of their effective strength, and had not achieved any of their set objectives.⁹⁸ Estimates of FAPLA losses were well over 800 soldiers killed, over 800 wounded, and two dozen captured, as well as heavy equipment.⁹⁹ Facing crippling losses, it was likely that FAPLA would soon be obliged to withdraw, handing the SADF the possibility of an offensive strike to wipe out enemy brigades to cripple its capacity to stay in the fight.

⁹² Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 52

⁹³ Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 55

⁹⁴ Steenkamp, Willem. *South Africa's Border War*. Pp.151.

⁹⁵ Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 55

⁹⁶ Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 56

⁹⁷ Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 64-66

⁹⁸ Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 66

⁹⁹ Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 69

But SADF operational strength would need to be boosted for that, given the parliamentary requirement that the Angolan deployment had to be defensive. This, though, would change after a visit by P.W Botha at the end of September. After an extensive briefing, President Botha gave his approval for the offensive phase of Operation Modular. Its purpose would be the elimination of all FAPLA forces east of the Cuito River. If achieved, this would ensure that there would be no repeat FAPLA offensive in the following year, and would provide UNITA and South Africa with space in which to take stock. Botha also committed additional forces, including tanks, to Angola for this new stage of Operation Modular. Following the State Presidential visit, the general staff returned to Pretoria to begin planning for a second phase of warfare, in which they would now have a far freer hand than before.

Phase one, however, was not yet over. The SADF needed to achieve stabilisation of the area south of the Lomba River. On the south side, the FAPLA brigade had gone to ground to hold its position but it was vulnerable as it was in the sights of the SADF.¹⁰⁰ On the morning of 30 September, as South African command was planning an attack on the brigade, at exactly the same time that FAPLA commanders were preparing to evacuate back to the north. SADF intelligence witnessed an advance brigade unit laying a temporary bridge across the Lomba River near the position of another force. A decision was then taken to strike before the FAPLA enemy had any opportunity to combine brigades or to receive supplies and reinforcements.¹⁰¹

On 3 October the SADF moved to its planned attack position after receiving word that the FAPLA brigade had begun its withdrawal. Its enemy force was ambushed on an open flood plain before its Lomba River crossing, and provided little resistance. FAPLA troops who were not gunned down fled, abandoning vehicles and equipment, while the rickety bridge subsequently collapsed underneath the weight of retreating FAPLA armour.¹⁰² By 3 October, the Angolan brigade was viewed officially as having been destroyed. With this nail in the coffin of the FAPLA offensive, the remaining shaken brigades east of the Cuito River had no option but to withdraw.

What do the events of phase one of Operation Modular tell us about the SADF? The first thing we should notice is that there was extensive planning and that various contingencies were planned for. Planning – and its scope – also reflects the shifting concerns and priorities of South Africa's government. Under B.J. Vorster, there was a greater sense of circumscribed limits and a clear stance against the risks of escalation. Major escalation commenced after P.W Botha came to power in the new role of State President. As we have already seen, as Vorster's Minister of Defence, Botha had already been pushing for a greater interventionist role in Angola. This came

100 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 73

101 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 74

102 Commandant van Moltke. A Concise History of Operation Modular. pp. 75

to a climax after his visit to the front in September 1987 when he more or less authorised his generals to be free to use forces as they saw fit. Leopold Scholtz ponders whether Botha's "helpful attitude" suggests that the generals held more sway than he did.

To a degree, this may be taking insufficient account of the wider political situation. Vorster had put in place the measures required for covert operations, and Botha had been in favour of heightened intervention in Angola from the outset. Phase one provided Botha with a precedent to show his security advisers that the SADF was in control across the border and could maintain the upper hand. Even so, some continuities in scenario planning continued to be an important factor in SADF deliberations. Even with its Chief of Army (by then Jannie Geldenhuys) drawn into Pretoria planning of a more openly aggressive phase two of Operation Modular, it needs to be remembered that P.W. Botha had not authorised open conventional warfare and the policy of minimising troop casualties and equipment losses remained firm, despite Geldenhuys's eventual announcement in November that South Africa was involved in operations in Angola.¹⁰³ By then, it was highly unlikely that the South African government would have been able to explain away an expeditionary intervention escalation on the scale in which troops and armour were being funnelled into its neighbouring territory.

Phase one of Operation Modular is viewed by the author of *The Concise History of Operation Modular*, Commandant von Moltke, as having been the most crucial phase of the Angolan conflict of the 1980s. Had that stage failed, UNITA would have lost control of Mavinga, and South Africa's key Angolan ally would have been toppled. The knock-on effect of that would have been felt in the negotiations around UNSCR 435 and the future of South West Africa. Having Angola drawn into the diplomatic equation amounted to a crucial bargaining chip, which was that the development of circumstances favourable to Pretoria could lead to the withdrawal of the SADF and of SADF aid to UNITA. In any event, Phase one was effective in what it had accomplished for the SADF. It had crushed the FAPLA advance on Mavinga, and left South African forces well-placed for a further drive against UNITA's enemy. In addition, the Defence Force generals were able to gain political consent for the use of enlarged forces at their discretion. At this stage, then, the Angolan theatre looked to be yielding favourable outcomes, and possibilities for South Africa, in the managing of both its own regional affairs and in negotiating its tricky position in the General Assembly of the United Nations.

103 Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War: 1966-1989*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013. Pp. 220

Chapter Two

Operation Moduler Phase Two

Phase Two of Operation Moduler begins to tie in with the best-established popular narrative of the Angolan border war, a story which centres on the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. This was because prevailing in that theatre of hostilities was one of the possible objectives for the SADF, given that it was the staging ground of the latest FAPLA offensive. In this chapter, we will consider the evolution of Moduler as it began to wind down and to transform itself into a cycle of successively extended operations designed to push FAPLA forces back against Cuito Cuanavale, and creating circumstances for blurred decisions and confusion over the intentions of planning..

The second leg of the Moduler operation moved within a context of FAPLA failure, as according to its directives, Mavinga was supposed to have been under its control by the end of September, in time for the start of the rainy season which would have provided a defensive ground advantage while its command bolstered its strength within UNITA territory. This was to have been followed by an assault on the UNITA headquarters at Jamba in July 1988.¹ This, as we have seen, did not occur. FAPLA was thwarted at the Lomba River, a reversal which was attributed to South African intervention.² FAPLA propaganda predictably exaggerated the brigade strength of the enemy it had confronted in the field.

Yet, their Pretoria adversary had not been deployed at full capacity. To the contrary, the South African expeditionary battalions which faced the FAPLA offensive were considered by their command to be under-equipped and not able to commit adequately to the offensive drive of Operation Moduler without further rearmament and reinforcements. There were a number of hindrances when it came to moving into any immediately renewed action. The SADF's only assault vehicles were its Ratels, light armoured troop-carriers, while FAPLA had at its disposal heavy Russian tanks. The bulk of the UNITA forces to which the SADF was assigned was untrained in conventional warfare, and was likely to be an uncertain quality in a situation of set-piece battle. FAPLA was also known to be equipped with sophisticated Soviet anti-air defences, as well as advanced MiG23 fighter jets, and this meant that any air support for South African operations would have to face the risk of equipment losses and that constant worry for – an unacceptable number of combat casualties.

¹ Heitman, H. *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase*. Gibraltar: Ashanti Pub., 1990. 79

² Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 79 . Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War: 1966-1989*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013. pp. 227

A further weighty consideration was that all planning up to this point had been as specifically defensive measures. And, as yet, there had been no indication of a sudden shift in government policy which would allowed for a South African counter offensive.³ Therefore, the SADF had no option but to hold its position until troop and armour reinforcements arrived to enable it to return to the fighting field. This gave the beleaguered FAPLA brigades time to withdraw, re-group and re-supply, denying their enemy a chance to finish them off. Intelligence awareness of this re-grouping also worried the SADF, stuck in its defensive postures while anxieties over a renewed assault lingered.⁴ The South Africans only sounded an all-clear on the 5 October, when it became clear that FAPLA was withdrawing completely and would not be embarking on any offensive action.

The transitional phasing of Operation Moduler is summarised crisply by Major W.A. Dorning, following a visit to a brigade's forward headquarters in September.⁵ By the end of that month, all previous objectives had been attained, and these gains had led to Botha giving the Chief of Army carte blanche for further expansion in Angola.⁶ This easing of political restrictions ushered in a significantly more ambitious military enterprise, marking the major Moduler operational transition. Envisaged within a time frame of 6 October to 15 December 1987, this second offensive stage was projected as three actions:

Phase 1 – Stopping the FAPLA offensive, to be effectively completed by 3 October.

Phase 2 - 20 SA Brigade to gain initiative by 6 November, using only its existing forces, and thereafter to inflict maximum damage on FAPLA forces east of the Cuito.

Phase 3 – 20 SA Brigade and linked forces to operate with UNITA to destroy FAPLA forces east of the Cuito by 15 December.”⁷

This chimed with Pretoria's political thrust of aiding UNITA and terminating FAPLA's offensive capabilities. Operations would be run in accordance with the doctrine of mobilised warfare, with the SADF and UNITA conducting skirmishes, staging light artillery strikes, engaging in psychological warfare, and launching air-strikes on enemy encampments to

³ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 79

⁴ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 81

⁵ South African National Defence Force Military Intelligence Archive, Pretoria, J.F Huyser Collection, Box 30, Appendix E To The History of Op Moduler (Phase one): A Personal Impression of OP Moduler (Phase one) based on a visit to 20 Brigade Forward-HQ over the period of 19-30 September 1987: 70248596PE MAJ W. Dorning. pp.22

⁶ Dorning, W. Appendix A To The History of Op Moduler (Phase one) pp.21-22

⁷ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 84 , This is in all likelihood taken from part two of a Concise History of Operation Moduler.

continually harass Luanda's forces and erode their morale.⁸ These small-scale stabs bought the SADF time for the arrival of infantry reinforcements. Aside from concentrating on the elimination of FAPLA forces on the east bank of the Cuito, phase three also included the targeting and shelling of Cuito Cuanavale in the event that such more sweeping action would be necessary for attaining South African objectives.⁹

With that contingency part of SADF thinking, its artillery was positioned to fire not only on locations that were identified as active conflict zones, but also on Cuito town itself.¹⁰ SADF artillery and air-strikes on the town on 11 and 12 October seem to have been a diversionary tactic to shift the focus of FAPLA forces away from the SADF formations as a primary target, tempting them to push defensive resources into the wrong place.

What the SADF faced was a narrowing gap. Although the FAPLA withdrawal created suitable conditions for mobile warfare, the fact that FAPLA forces had begun to converge around 13 October, and the prospect of fortified brigades which were dug in on higher ground, raised the prospect of conventional warfare. This positional confrontation was not appealing to South African command, given its politically-driven anxieties over high white casualty rates. SADF reconnaissance teams were despatched to scout FAPLA positions around the Cuanavale-Chambinga high ground area, in order to prepare for the destruction of Angolan forces stationed nearby. The South Africans also began to run dummy tactics, creating mock artillery positions to throw FAPLA off the trail of their gun emplacements.¹¹

In due course, two options were presented to General Liebenberg:

1. Prevent the FAPLA brigades from withdrawing into positions around Cuito Cuanavale until strong infantry and armour is deployed; then destroying them in their current positions.
2. Prevent the FAPLA brigades from withdrawing into positions around Cuito Cuanavale until completion of full deployment. Then send a force up west of the Cuito to take Cuito Cuanavale from the north-west. The brigades east of the Cuito would be cut off and could be eliminated 'at leisure'.¹²

Romer-Heitman records that Liebenberg was inclined towards the second tactical option, scouting potential river crossing spots and ordering bridging equipment, although, ultimately,

⁸ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 84

⁹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 84

¹⁰ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 87

¹¹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 91

¹² Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 93, Again most likely quoted from concise history of operation moulder part 2

he did not follow either proposals.¹³ This may have been due partly to a concern that a big run at Cuito Cuanavale could run too high a risk of damaging enemy air strikes.¹⁴ Instead, Liebenberg opted for an operation on the Chaminga high ground where enemy forces were then deployed. Its launch was set tentatively for the first week of November.¹⁵

Leopold Scholtz has considered South African planning at this stage in his 'The South African Strategic and Operational Objectives in Angola'. As Scholtz has noted, a first option involved utilising a UNITA force to disrupt FAPLA logistics to force a withdrawal. A second entailed a secondary force attacking Cuito from the west, after which UNITA would occupy the town. The third recourse was maintaining a force on the east bank of the river, and sending a western force to harry the FAPLA position at Cuito Cuanavale to try to induce a withdrawal.¹⁶ Unlike other commentators such as Romer-Heitman who assume that the town formed a prize for the SADF, in Scholtz's view Liebenberg's course of action did not include the capture of Cuito Cuanavale. Indeed, later planning documents emanating from Liebenberg's command contained no reference to the capture of the town, underlining that Cuito itself was not an objective for the SADF.¹⁷

During this stage, only one FAPLA brigade was entrenched and was being reinforced on the Chaminga high ground. Another, though, was moving south in an to snuff out South African artillery fire.¹⁸ This movement and its exposed positioning made it a tempting target. The SADF attack on 17 October did not, however, go as planned. Heavy terrain impeded progress, and dense plants and trees created handy avenues along which FAPLA was able to channel fire, forcing the enemy infantry assault to be abandoned.¹⁹ Nonetheless, despite the failure of the ground assault, SAAF air strikes inflicted considerable losses.

Still, although damaged, the FAPLA force remained on its feet. The SADF failure to overpower the enemy brigade sucked it into a stalemate with its FAPLA adversary, although the brigade was now pinned down by South African artillery. And stalemate in this theatre of operations was not without advantages for Pretoria's forces. The FAPLA brigade was prevented from moving against the artillery positions of its opponents, as well as from reaching its own Chaminga high staging ground. South African artillery also blocked reinforcements from

¹³ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 93

¹⁴ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp.281

¹⁵ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 93

¹⁶ Scholtz, Leopold. "The South African Strategic And Operational Objectives In Angola, 1987-88." Sci.Mil. Scientia Militaria - South African Journal of Military Studies 38.1 (2011). pp. 82

¹⁷ Scholtz, Leopold. "The South African Strategic And Operational Objectives In Angola". pp. 82

¹⁸ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 93

¹⁹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 94

reaching the FAPLA position.²⁰ At the same time, any SADF infantry attack would have left its ground force exposed to a flanking movement by a FAPLA brigade detachment. The stalemate was broken on 25 October, when the South African ground force pulled away to a defensive position between its backing artillery and the Angolan brigade, which then promptly moved to withdraw.²¹

With the stalemate ended, the South Africans concluded that they once again held the initiative in Angola. Thus, the moment had come for the third phase of Operation Modular - the destruction of all FAPLA brigades east of the Cuito River. At this juncture, the SADF's general staff broached the possibility of a fourth leg to the action planned, to include the capturing of Cuito Cuanavale should it prove "necessary or convenient".²² The word 'convenient' carried considerable meaning, as it again affirmed Pretoria's requirement of minimal combat casualties. For the taking of FAPLA's forward command position, the South African imperative of convenient would almost certainly have required a FAPLA retreat ahead of any frontal encounter. In the event, Liebenberg got hostilities underway with instructions to maintain pressure on the two hard-pressed FAPLA brigades which had not gained the Chambinga high ground. Cuito Cuanavale was also to be blanketed by artillery in an effort to disrupt its airbase there, and to hamper any river supply movements attempting to cross the Cuito.

The rest of October saw a series of low- level engagements, dominated mostly by South African artillery fire and air strikes. The end of that month signalled a significant re-escalation of the onslaught with the arrival of infantry reinforcements as well as a tank squadron south of Mavinga.²³ This bolstered SADF strength by roughly doubling it from 1500 to 3000 combatants, although this force was still modest in comparison with the 15000 soldiers that FAPLA was reported have assembled under its command in and around Cuito Cuanavale.²⁴

According to SADF intelligence of the first week of November, FAPLA command was still unaware of its reinforcing infantry presence, and had based its planning of resistance on having a lighter scattering of forces against the numerical superiority of its several brigades.²⁵ In the event, any miscalculation by its enemy was by then of little concern to the SADF, which had already begun planning a strike at an Angolan brigade, aimed at catching the FAPLA counter-offensive off guard.²⁶ The SADF move was to engage two FAPLA brigades with its known

²⁰ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 102

²¹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 107-108

²² Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 109

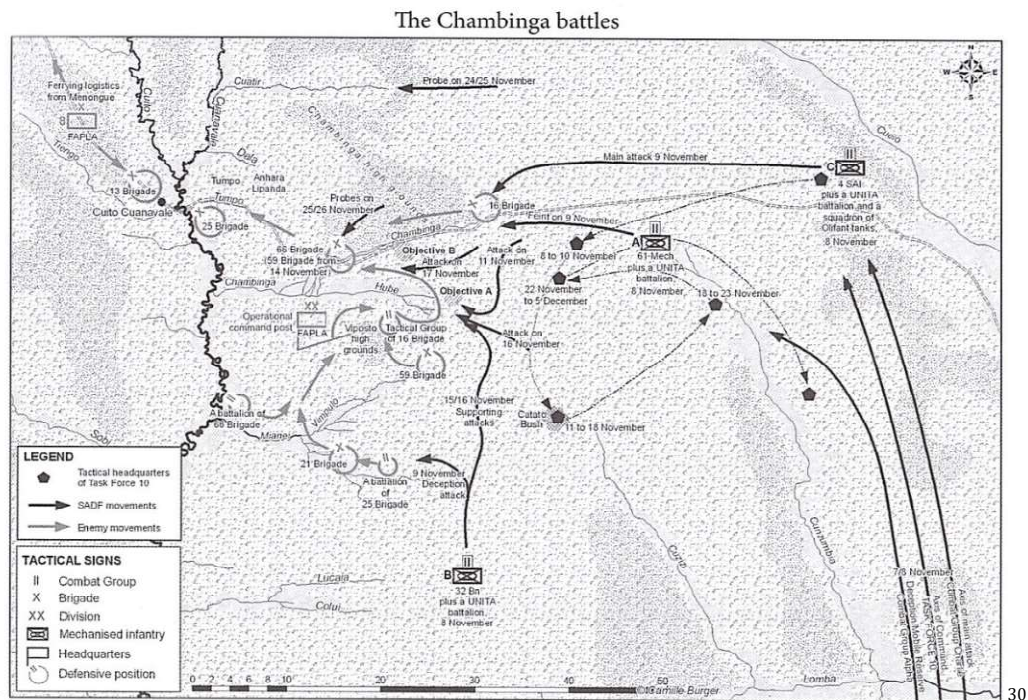
²³ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 114

²⁴ Bridgland, Fred. The War for Africa: Twelve Months That Transformed a Continent. Gibraltar: Ashanti, 1990. Pp.183. Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 288

²⁵ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 118-119

²⁶ Bridgland, Fred. The War for Africa. pp. 187, Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 119

strength, while ambushing the third force with its reinforcing infantry contingent and mechanised battalion.²⁷ This formation was attacked on 9 November, but its rump was able to withdraw before having to engage fully with the enemy, although not before the destruction of its tank force.²⁸ South African costs amounted to a mere nine killed or wounded, and some minor equipment losses. FAPLA did not get off quite as lightly, sustaining over eighty casualties and a heavy loss of equipment.²⁹



The SADF had, nonetheless, failed in its objective of wiping out its FAPLA brigade target. This was followed on 11 November by a repeat strike which, after getting bogged down in a minefield, also came up short after the assaulting force had to withdraw.³¹ Again, damage was nevertheless done. The Angolan brigade suffered almost 400 casualties, and the destruction of around three dozen of its vehicles. This was in sharp contrast to, once again, no more than glancing SADF personnel and material losses.³² Yet, as the FAPLA brigade was still on its feet, the SADF had still come short of securing its objective.

For Leopold Scholtz, this failure was of decisive wider significance for, in his view, had the Angolan brigade been destroyed on 9 November the entire war could have ended in markedly

²⁷ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 292

²⁸ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 129. Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 297

²⁹ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 198

³⁰ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 294

³¹ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 137

³² Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 138

more favourable circumstances for South Africa.³³ On the other hand, that reading of the situation may not necessarily be the whole story. Although the SADF was finding the destruction of FAPLA brigades far from swift and straightforward, the heavy casualties that it was able to inflict still pushed it towards the thwarting of another FAPLA offensive in 1988. If slower than envisaged, South Africa's position continued to advance.

The week following the abortive attempts at crushing the FAPLA formation became known as the "Chambinga Gallop" as the Angolan brigades at large in the field began to converge in tandem towards the Chambinga higher grounds. For SADF command, this seemed to signify a new 'Cuito Cuanavale-centric' tactic by FAPLA. For their part, evidently believing that the enemy intention was to occupy the town, the Angolans started to pull all of their forces back to defend their forward headquarters.³⁴ The SADF actions changed quickly from attempting to halt the FAPLA withdrawal to trying to impose massive casualties. If the Angolan brigades were able to slip across the Cuito River still in strength, it could essentially have meant the possible end of the entire South African campaign. So, contingency response plans were devised to deal with FAPLA's rearwards movements – such as which combat groups would follow which brigades.³⁵

Planning of the SADF's attempt to ambush a brigade on 16 November ran into the sand, however. What was meant to have been a flanking assault on a withdrawing FAPLA column turned into an unanticipated and draining frontal collision. The South Africans were seriously hampered by ammunition and fuel shortages, caught out by having to dash to face their FAPLA opposition in that misdirected ambush.³⁶ Again, the SADF found itself unable to completely overrun its enemy, and the Angolans fell back to another secure crossing to reach their favoured Chambinga area.³⁷

Still, the South African costs were again negligible, with only four deaths and some twenty wounded. Staying on the offensive thereafter, the Defence Force pursued the brigade to the FAPLA Chambinga bridge position, prompted by intelligence which reported that FAPLA was preparing a withdrawal from the bridge and could be caught on the back foot.³⁸ This attack on 17 November also miscarried and, once more, the Angolans were able to pull back with light losses, helped by cautious and incompetent UNITA intervention in the action. Romer-Heitman's speculation is that it was seen as being against UNITA's political interests for the South Africans to have been drawn in fully at Chambinga, given the risk of substantial casualties. The

³³ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 297

³⁴ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 142

³⁵ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 145

³⁶ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 303

³⁷ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 151

³⁸ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 152

supposition, which may or may be far-fetched, is that a costly engagement by Pretoria would have had the knock-on effect of creating political pressure for a withdrawal and an end to the aiding of UNITA.³⁹

The battle of 17 November would indeed mark the coming end of South Africa's Operation Moduler, although not in the decisive way that had come to cause UNITA command such considerable anxieties over a possible loss of support. There was another factor weighing on the minds of SADF commanders. The great bulk of their soldiers who had been stationed in Angola since September were National Servicemen, utilised for short periods of active duty. Although short, these were also commonly intense. As one battalion commander, Colonel Deon Ferreira reflected, and probably without undue exaggeration, "many of them had seen more action in three months than many South African soldiers saw in the whole of World War II".⁴⁰ To sustain a war effort in demanding conditions for longer, the SADF could not maintain its existing forces in Angola beyond the limits of their effective endurance. And the replacing of its expeditionary servicemen would inevitably involve the specialised training of fresh recruits to cope with the harsh and hot cross-border Angolan environment. Inevitably, then, the demobilisation and remobilisation burden would come to be a key factor in much SADF future planning, especially in the envisaged 'phase four' option of the Moduler campaign vision, the seizure of Cuito Cuanavale. In this respect, high command entertained three options:

*The first was that following the final complete destruction of FAPLA forces east of the Cuito river, momentum should be maintained by feeding in a fresh force to move on the town from the west to capture it.⁴¹

*The second was the general relieving of troops stationed in Angola; this, though, was expected to be cumbersome and logistically very difficult.⁴²

*The third was simply to throw the current forces available into an offensive to take Cuito Cuanavale. The concern here was the danger of incurring heavy casualties which would be unacceptable for the terms of Pretoria's fighting mandate.⁴³

Given that scenario, what were the viable options? Having a fresh force running at Cuito from the west, while forces to the east applied pressure, was ruled out. It would have required too much time to assemble for action; allowing for demobilisation and getting in a fresh force

³⁹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 154

⁴⁰ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 304

⁴¹ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 305

⁴² Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 305

⁴³ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 305

before late-December looked to be barely surmountable.⁴⁴ Although this approach was reportedly supported by field commanders it was, however, decided against by the general staff, who may have had to take account of pressing political considerations which were prevailing at that point.⁴⁵

Any Cuito Cuanavale upheaval would have been damaging to pending or intermittently continuing peace talks between Cuba and South Africa, as well as to the on-going negotiations surrounding the future of South West Africa.⁴⁶ Here, Leopold Scholtz and Fred Bridgland are at odds over the actual chronology of the events surrounding the negotiations between Havana and Pretoria. What matters, ultimately, is that it does seem plausible that both South Africa and Cuba understood the prospect of what might be achieved by the candid diplomatic intent behind these discussions, and that their importance outweighed that of any contentious act of moving to capture Cuito Cuanavale.

The prudent path for South Africa was not to push ahead with the tentative planning possibility of taking Cuito in the event of such an action being “necessary and convenient” to the SADF.⁴⁷ Indeed, and in any event, general staff vagueness when it came to Cuito Cuanavale strategy, tactics and its actual importance as a target also indicates that it was marginal to South Africa’s Angolan agenda.⁴⁸ From the available literature, only Kat Liebenberg seems to have had some interest in trying to seize the town.

General Liebenberg’s approach seemed to suggest some rather hazy planning. It was to stage an attack against FAPLA forces on the east bank of the Cuito, to force them into withdrawing across the river.⁴⁹ In this eventuality, should the SADF have failed to cripple the Angolans before they turned, it would bring on the necessity of moving on Cuito Cuanavale, to rule out any future repeat of FAPLA offensives. Conventional in its conception of a staged push against an enemy position, this onslaught deviated from the Defence Force policy of mobile warfare which, Scholtz has argued, was increasingly dictating the mounting of these and subsequent operations.

The South African attack, for which the current crop of national servicemen was mobilised for a last major round of action, commenced on 25 November. General Willie Meyer defined its minimum requirement as that of overcoming opposing forces on the Chambinga bridge.⁵⁰ Again,

⁴⁴ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 305

⁴⁵ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 306

⁴⁶ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. Pp. 306 , Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 227-228

⁴⁷ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 109

⁴⁸ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 306

⁴⁹ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 306

⁵⁰ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 160

dense terrain and minefields hindered the SADF advance. Its slow crawl and an inability to secure a clear route afforded FAPLA some breathing space to stage an orderly withdrawal under the screen of a defensive artillery barrage to check forward movement by the South Africans. The calling off of this attack brought to an end the SADF's Operation Moduler.⁵¹ That meant that its national servicemen could be sent home. But South Africa's Angolan intervention was not yet finished. With the fate of Cuito Cuanavale still to be settled, Operation Moduler would now be giving way to Operation Hooper.

⁵¹ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 308

Chapter Three:

Operations Hooper and Packer

At the end of Moduler, Pretoria had not achieved all the gains for which it had set out. Although the 1987 FAPLA offensive had been knocked back, the SADF had been unable to clear enemy forces from their operations in defined UNITA territory. Instead, FAPLA had been able to entrench its positions around Cuito Cuanavale. With its brigades receiving reinforcements, supplies and being rearmed, South Africa's opponents were virtually re-positioning the Angolan situation to one similar to the start of 1987. A few of the field officers involved in Operation Moduler felt that the damage inflicted upon FAPLA would be a lingering sore, and that this instructive experience would rule out a repeat offensive.¹ This view was not, however, shared by the general staff which resolved to re-engage in the Angolan theatre. This decision some difficulties, one of which was the issue of national servicemen. The SADF could not continue its operations with existing troops forces past their December demobilisation date, and fresh recruits would require preparatory training for Angola. This provided FAPLA with a lull in fighting in which to reorganise.

With greater freedom of movement, FAPLA was also able to recover equipment that had been lost during its engagements with the SADF. Still, while the South African presence in Angola had been reduced, continuing pressure from UNITA meant that FAPLA could not simply reinforce its depleted brigades by diluting forces stationed in other parts of the country. Therefore, its command embarked on rapid recruitment and training to strengthen its forces still positioned along the eastern bank of the Cuito river.² Replenishing was accompanied by fresh defensive strategies to secure Cuito Cuanavale from the SADF. This took the form of three consecutive defensive lines as fronts to impede SADF progress towards Cuito. The first two lines were made up of FAPLA's largest brigades, dispersed widely across the fronts to provide maximum cover, with the third and final defensive hedge at the rear being, in effect, Cuito Cuanavale itself, defended by all remaining forces, including a Cuban battalion.³

Arguably, FAPLA's preparations suggest that its leadership was not entirely aware of the complex nature of the Cuito Cuanavale issue for their South African enemy. At this point, the Angolans had mounted an obvious 'Cuito-centric' defence in the expectation that the town would be the SADF's main target. The South African general staff, though, had other possible

¹ Heitman, H. War in Angola: The Final South African Phase. Gibraltar: Ashanti Pub., 1990. 169

² Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 170

³ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 171

eventualities to consider, completely distinct than some victorious conquest. The capture and open occupation of this Angolan town would be seriously damaging to South Africa's international diplomacy and to the continuing negotiations over a regional political settlement. Then, an inevitable later withdrawal from Cuito Cuanavale would be a propaganda gift to the MPLA, as it would be claimed to be a victory for FAPLA.⁴

At the same time, the consolidation of the Angolan forces around Cuito Cuanavale ran the risk of FAPLA putting its head into a noose of its own making. As the SADF objective was the elimination of its forces from the field of the Angolan conflict, a concentration around the town was bound to bring it on to Cuito. Given the limiting political considerations which they were having to bear in mind, the South Africans would also have little other option than to try to break FAPLA strength at its defensive lines.⁵ This meant the likelihood – or near certainty – of a frontal onslaught on the FAPLA position.⁶ The ultimate target was not to overrun the town of Cuito in order to occupy it, but more to pulverise its FAPLA defenders into a complete defeat.

On 28 November 1987, General Kat Liebenberg's tactical staff proposed four options for progress:

Option 1: Destroy the Cuito bridge, and move a force up west of the river to threaten Cuito Cuanavale, while a force east of the river ties down FAPLA elements there

Option 2: Withdraw all South African forces and leave UNITA to continue with guerrilla operations.

Option 3: Maintain the present situation.

Option 4: Deploy a strong force west of the Cuito and take Cuito Cuanavale.⁷

Liebenberg once again favoured a combination of planned action, covering the first and third options. A small force, augmented by UNITA soldiers, was placed west of Cuito to harass the FAPLA supply line. At the same time, another force was to be positioned to the east, with the Cuito Cuanavale bridge to be destroyed by bombing.⁸ This tactic resembled a conventional siege, and a far cry from the South African emphasis on the use of mobile warfare. It has led Scholtz so far as to label it as handing a propaganda victory to the Cuban-Angolan alliance. For there

⁴ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 169

⁵ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War: 1966-1989. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013. pp.315, UNSC condemnation of South African aggression against Angola.

⁶ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 169

⁷ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 174

⁸ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 174

appeared to be no obvious basis for the SADF to have ditched its favoured mobility for an attritionist positional approach.⁹

Equally, and all the while, South Africa's primary target was clearly the FAPLA brigades to the east of the river, and that would explain the renewed attempt to eliminate the bridge, given the only partial success of the last attempt.¹⁰ Complete destruction of the crossing, combined with the imminent start of the rainy season, would make the river impassable. One of the SADF's previous failings had been its inability to prevent FAPLA forces from withdrawing to more secure ground.

The relieving of South Africa's national service troop deployment by a fresh wave was completed just after the first week of December. This was accompanied by a renewed barrage against FAPLA positions, as well as failed bomb strikes on the Cuito river bridge on 8 and 9 December.¹¹ This triggered the opening phase of the SADF's Operation Hooper, timed for December 1987.

Its core aim was the destruction of FAPLA forces east of the Cuito river by the end of that month. This was to be achieved through the pressures exerted by SADF contingents positioned eastwards and westwards of the town: from the west, supply lines to FAPLA brigades within Cuito were to be struck, and every running opportunity of openings through which to hit enemy forces was to be taken.¹² While planning objectives emphasised the necessity of uprooting and eliminating FAPLA's eastern force with the use of the maximum power at South Africa's disposal, and the demolition of the Cuito Cuanavale bridge, capture of the town itself remained essentially a contingency, an opportunity held back in reserve should there be circumstances in which its defences could be easily surmounted. This eventuality was fully in accordance with what had transpired from P.W. Botha's September visit, namely, that 'if the opportunity arises to capture Cuito Cuanavale relatively easily, planning should be done to do it.'¹³

It was still not, then, a specified operational objective for the SADF. Indeed, an Operation Hooper 'Intelligence Appreciation' of 26 December accorded low priority to any overcoming of

⁹ Scholtz, Leopold. "The Lessons of the Border War." *Sci.Mil. Scientia Militaria - South African Journal of Military Studies* 40.3 (2013). pp346

¹⁰ Operation Coolidge

¹¹ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 177-178

¹² Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 178

¹³ Scholtz Op obj 85 (English), 61 Mech, Anon.: "Gesamentlike militere aksies deur die RSA en UNITA magte teen FAPLA magte in die Sesde Militere Streek van Angola vanaf Desember 1987 tot Maart 1988", paragraph 40, at http://www.61mech.org.za/assets/files/mediafiles/a347645f913fffde24b4d14607b03059bcbe06cb_1.pdf (Afrikaans)

Cuito Cuanavale defences.¹⁴ What was reiterated was the foremost objective of obliterating the FAPLA brigades which were gathered in the locality.¹⁵ Yet, it soon became evident that the original deadline of the end of December for achieving this could not be reached.¹⁶ It had become increasingly clear to SADF command that its new intake of soldiers in Angola would require more re-supplying and more intensive training, to say nothing of rest and equipment repair. These were time-consuming tasks which put the completion of the army's Angolan business by the end of 1987 beyond reach. Liebenberg was obliged to put back the first assault on his FAPLA brigade target until January.¹⁷

At the same time, sensitive political factors also entered the picture. Military command was advised that future actions against FAPLA ought to involve UNITA forces at the front, in a clear attempt to try to dispel the increasingly widespread impression that Savimbi's movement was simply an agent of South Africa's intentions in Angola. In planning of the next assault on a FAPLA brigade, provision was made for SADF troops to be mobilised as strength in the rear, to be sent into action at the front should the prior UNITA attacks on the enemy.¹⁸ In that sense, although UNITA was not viable as a substitute for the SADF, where it was feasible actions were envisaged in which there would be involvement by Savimbi's army alongside SADF elements.

The attempt to destroy the FAPLA force was a fumbling movement, which ended up as three separate actions. The first, spearheaded by UNITA early in January, went badly for the attackers. Although the UNITA force was able to break through and to reach the FAPLA position, it was only to discover that their enemy had already withdrawn and was then able to commence shelling the exposed UNITA location. The South Africans were also unable to render assistance as they were pinned down in their ground position by Angolan MiG fighters which were able to control the air. It was decided that a withdrawal was prudent and that a renewed attack would take place when weather conditions improved.¹⁹ The assault on the FAPLA brigade was renewed on 13 January, spearheaded by UNITA and backed by South African armoured and infantry forces which were accompanied by the remaining UNITA formation.²⁰

After quickly overcoming their enemy's outlying positions, the combined SADF-UNITA force struck the main camp of the FAPLA brigade hard, forcing it to fall back from its position after

¹⁴ South African National Defence Force Military Intelligence Archive, Pretoria, J.F Huyser Collection, Box 30, Appendix E To Staff Appreciation of Operation Hooper 26 Decemeber 1987.

¹⁵ Appendix E To Staff Appreciation of Operation Hooper. pp.17

¹⁶ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 180

¹⁷ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 184

¹⁸ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 187

¹⁹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 197

²⁰ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 207

sustaining heavy casualties and losing tanks and other mechanical equipment.²¹ By contrast, UNITA and the SADF were barely scratched. Despite this outright victory, the South African forces pulled back rather than attempting to push on through the now punctured defensive line. The cautiousness of their command was attributable to worries over FAPLA artillery strikes on men in vulnerable positions, as well as the danger to ground troops posed by enemy MiGs.²² This easing up gave FAPLA some breathing room in which to reinforce and to restructure its defence.²³ The restructuring came as a result of Fidel Castro's direct intervention in FAPLA's operational strategy. In effect, Castro checked FAPLA and his Cuban forces from retreating to Menongue and allowing Cuito Cuanavale fall into the hands of the SADF and UNITA, as its defence provided an opportunity to turn the town into a symbol of resistance and to rally popular opinion behind the Angolan war effort.²⁴

Acting on this, Castro pulled back the outlying FAPLA brigades to stiffen the second line of defence to try to secure the line against another breach by the SADF. Moreover, any further South African offensive would also be within the range of artillery based in Cuito Cuanavale. In the meantime, on 17 January, in a FAPLA counter-attack its brigade managed to reclaim its position from the occupying UNITA force, thereby regaining the ground that had been lost in action four days previously.²⁵

Following a Tactical Headquarters briefing involving Jannie Geldenhuys and fellow generals on 28 January, Geldenhuys took stock of the broader situation as a set of "personal guidelines". In these, he made it clear that the SADF would not be able to remain in Angola for much longer, even though, despite international condemnation, there appeared to be some limited consent from Western states which provided a measure of latitude. For Geldenhuys, it was equally clear that the SADF's future objective would have to be that of withdrawal from Angola, but that the manner of any withdrawal should not jeopardise any of the gains made during its intervention. The South African pull-out was to be effected once the original third phase of Operation Moduler - the destruction of all FAPLA forces east of the Cuito River - had been completed. The preferred date for this movement was by the end of February 1988.²⁶

The chances of South Africa being out of Angola by the end of the following month looked slim, especially given the gap between planned combat actions. Thus, the SADF was only prepared for its next engagement on 14 February, several weeks after its last major action.

²¹ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 324

²² Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 325

²³ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 213

²⁴ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 325

²⁵ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 326

²⁶ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 220

Originally, the South Africans envisaged their target as again being the FAPLA brigade, as in the previous month. However, with troops struck by sickness, there was a change of tactic.²⁷ It was decided that UNITA would assault this enemy brigade at the same time as the SADF engaged another FAPLA formation.²⁸ The FAPLA brigade took heavy casualties in this fierce action, and sustained a further heavy death toll in an attempted counter-attack against the South Africans who had taken up position at the location that had been occupied previously by the Angolans.²⁹ A triumphalist claim by one military writer, Hilton Hamann, is that this SADF victory meant the destruction of the Angolan brigade. That, however, could be said to be somewhat exaggerated as a judgement.³⁰ Although the FAPLA losses were clearly high by the rates of mortality and wounding to be seen in previous Angolan battles, much of its brigade remained intact and retained the capability to be utilised in the further defence of Cuito Cuanavale or of the Tumpo triangle point.

Nevertheless, the outcome of the February SADF assault was said to have infuriated Fidel Castro, as his field orders intended to prevent this kind of loss had seemingly been disregarded. Accordingly, a new commanding General was sent to Angola with a brief to restructure dug-in positions around the east bank of the Cuito and to strengthen artillery on the west bank to support the FAPLA bridgehead formation.³¹ The FAPLA forces were now hedged into a thirty square kilometre area, which became known as the Tumpo triangle. This in a way, presented the SADF with a more straightforward and simplified objective. South Africa now had to drive the FAPLA forces out of the Tumpo triangle and across the Cuito River, and its cross-border mission would have been completed.³²

²⁷ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa: Twelve Months That Transformed a Continent*. Gibraltar: Ashanti, 1990. 272

²⁸ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 227

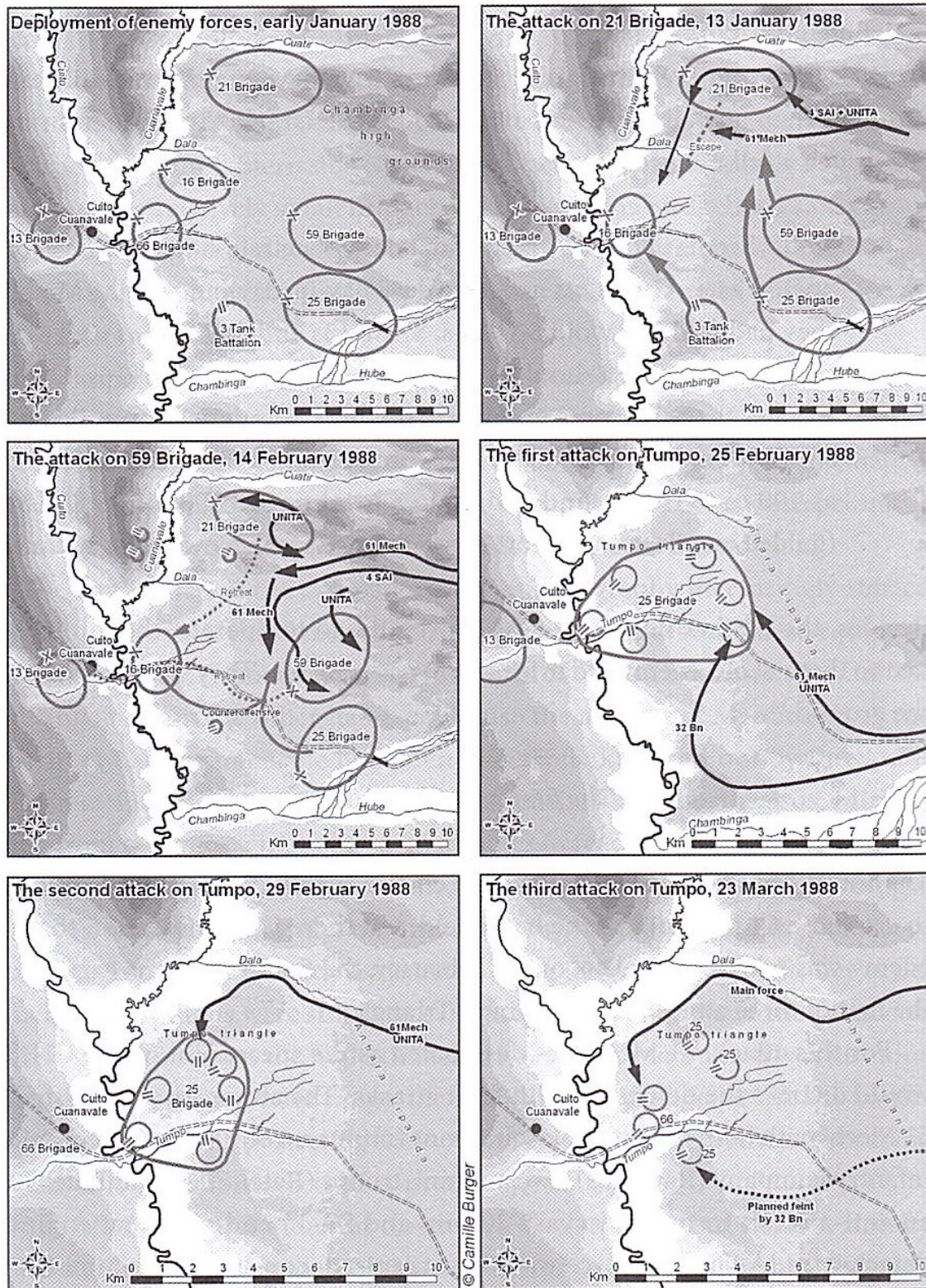
²⁹ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 234

³⁰ Hamann, Hilton. *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-era Military Generals*. Cape Town: Zebra, 2001.96

³¹ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 235

³² Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 282

Tumpo



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³³ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp.342

The obstacle faced by Pretoria's commanders was that the FAPLA regrouping in the Tumpo Triangle presented a unified defence against their offensive. Up to this point in the hostilities, the SADF had singled out FAPLA brigades as its expeditionary forces were wholly outnumbered by its enemy east of the Cuito. In circumstances that had now changed, the prospect of skirting FAPLA forces to attack the town arose once more. As on previous occasions, it was quashed.³⁴ The decision against any occupation of Cuito Cuanavale was confirmed, as before, by discussion between General Geldenhuys and P.W. Botha, in which the State President had emphasised that Angola ought not to be allowed to turn into a trap for South Africa, by becoming a Vietnam-like situation of its own making.³⁵ At the same time, it is interesting to note that despite South Africa's avoidance of occupation because of the deeper entanglement that it was likely to bring, there was a belief in some quarters that if its forces were able to occupy the east river bank, FAPLA would have been forced to abandon the town altogether in any event.³⁶ With Cuito Cuanavale removed from the battle equation, that notion also fed into how the South Africans envisaged their withdrawal, as a neutralised town would enable UNITA to entrench along the Cuito and create holding conditions in which the SADF would be able to withdraw on orderly terms, with its mission accomplished.

The Tumpo Triangle circumstances with their FAPLA bridgehead did not favour the SADF. The months that had passed since the formation of its defensive lines had provided FAPLA with sufficient time to greatly strengthen the final barrier position before Cuito Cuanavale. Possible enemy approach routes had been heavily mined, bulldozers had created lethal fire zones, artillery coverage had been expanded, and a stockpiling of munitions and supplies had ensured the preparedness of FAPLA for a siege contingency.³⁷ As if that were not not enough of an obstacle for the SADF, the assembled FAPLA troop density was higher at this stage of the conflict than it had ever been previously. Still, it appeared that the MPLA government had little faith in the defensive capability of its forces, as the SADF intercepted a transmission ordering their withdrawal from Cuito Cuanavale to Menongue. This was, however, not followed by any retreat from the town. On the one hand, it is possible that this may have been an attempt to deceive their enemy. On the other, it is possibly much more likely that Luanda was overruled by Castro and his Angolan commanders, who had confidence in the strength of their holding position.³⁸

The SADF continued regardless of the FAPLA build-up, and a first assault on the Tumpo Triangle was planned for 25 February 1988. This involved a reliance on flanking movements,

³⁴ As mentioned earlier in this chapter.

³⁵ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 334

³⁶ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 243

³⁷ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 244

³⁸ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 248

and a tactical avoidance of any territorial occupation. Any gains of ground were to be held by UNITA forces, leaving the SADF free to maintain its mobility, moving into concealed positions from which it could strike out in a flanking run at another target area.³⁹ The final stage of the planned February attack was to include a clearing of objectives east of the Cuito River, the destruction of the Cuito Bridge, and the subsequent withdrawal of South African forces.⁴⁰ As with previous thinking, there again appears to have been no desire for any occupation.

Unfortunately for the SADF, once operations began, matters no longer went according to plan. Upon arrival at what had been identified as a combat zone, one of its battalions discovered that FAPLA had abandoned its positions in a pre-emptive withdrawal.⁴¹ The advancing force found itself up against FAPLA minefields which delayed its movements by several hours before reaching bunkers that it had intended to clear of Angolan soldiers. It was only to find that FAPLA had again withdrawn.⁴² Thus, while forward positions had been effectively broken through, the enemy had kept itself intact, providing little cause for any victory celebration.⁴³ Further action required movement across a large and unprotected stretch of open terrain, and it was eventually resolved to pull back to avoid the possible risk of incurring unacceptably heavy casualties.⁴⁴ While there had been hostilities which resulted in nearly 200 FAPLA dead and a loss of some of its armour, efficient FAPLA scouting had been able to tip off Angolan defence command as to what to do to frustrate the enemy's forward movement.⁴⁵

Despite the failure of this attack, South African command decided on a renewed strike almost immediately. This second assault, four days later, was meant to replicate the aims of the first - engage the enemy, inflict as much damage as possible before it fled across the river, destroy the bridge, and then withdraw.⁴⁶ In the view of Helmoed Romer-Heitman, the SADF battalions were insufficiently prepared for another round of action so soon, a judgement echoed by Leopold Scholtz, who cites hindrances such as low morale due to an inhospitable climate, illness, and the slow re-supply of vital equipment.⁴⁷ This was disregarded in the decision to mount a second attack in the immediate aftermath of the failed first assault.⁴⁸ One consequence was that the South Africans had insufficient armour at their disposal, with their tank strength depleted

³⁹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 246

⁴⁰ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 247

⁴¹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 248

⁴² Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 250

⁴³ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp.344

⁴⁴ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 252

⁴⁵ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 253

⁴⁶ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 255

⁴⁷ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp.346

⁴⁸ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 257

further by the effectiveness of FAPLA's minefields.⁴⁹ The serious loss of armoured support led to the eventual decision early in March to call off an attack that had clearly become a failure. Subsequently, it transpired in the light of later intelligence estimates of FAPLA firepower that it had been exaggerated initially. A dismayed Commandant Mike Muller who had led the assault later claimed that if he had known that FAPLA tanks were still outnumbered by those in his command, he would have pressed on and "settled the whole matter".⁵⁰ In the event, the official SADF conclusion was that the short action had brought about no change to the balance of power situation in the field.⁵¹ The SADF failure suggested that its current forces were being stretched to the limits of their capability, with troops tired, supply irregular and vehicles becoming worn out. The end of Operation Hooper was signalled by the authorisation of the deployment of fresh soldiers and new armoured vehicles to assume Angolan operations as Operation Packer.

It was at this point that the background noise of regional negotiations and diplomacy began to grow significantly louder, taking political emphasis on the Angolan crisis away from the physical fighting in the territory, and placing it more and more squarely on the desk of the United States Assistant Secretary of State, Chester Crocker, where it came to be the lynchpin of his geopolitical strategy of linkage. Linkage, or Constructive Engagement, was a policy based on the belief that the issues face by Southern Africa were indissolubly connected, and that they could all be solved potentially, provided the solution lay in understanding their relation to one another. The question of the Angolan conflict, for example, could only be solved through the resolution of the crisis involving the future of South West Africa, which in turn could only be solved in connection to the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola.

Prospects of dealing with the instabilities of the region on the basis of negotiations of this kind were eased on by the major contemporaneous shift in Kremlin politics as well. The accession to power of Mikhail Gorbachev and his reformist policies of opening up the Soviet Union saw some thawing of relations between Pretoria and Moscow. Part of the threat of the MPLA government was its Eastern bloc alignment, and the change of stance towards South Africa by the Soviet Union greatly diminished the perceived threat of a spreading communist revolution in Southern Africa.⁵² An early indication of the diminishing of ideological hostility was the establishment of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Pretoria through the installation of a Soviet Desk in the South African capital at the beginning of 1988. By March of that year it appeared that all parties, the MPLA, the Cubans, the Soviets, and the South Africans were ready to come to the

⁴⁹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 261

⁵⁰ Bridgland, Fred. The War for Africa. pp. 314

⁵¹ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 349-350

⁵² In the eyes of Pretoria.

negotiating table with America, with Chester Crocker, specifically, as the mediator.⁵³ After negotiations in Geneva, it seemed that all parties would shortly come to a mutual agreement, and that Crocker's policy of Linkage could soon be put into effect.⁵⁴ The war in Angola, however, had acquired momentum. Its hostilities were set to carry on, and to continue to drag on to the very end phases of the negotiations.

Operation Packer got underway early in March with the relieving of national servicemen serving in infantry and mechanised battalions by a South African brigade following the unsuccessful attack of 1 March.⁵⁵ The crucial issue of troop training ahead of Angolan deployment has already featured several times in the present discussion, a particular point of interest given that Helmoed Romer-Heitman's account – which draws extensively on SADF documents – virtually overlooks issues relating to preparedness. There are merely brief observations of the SADF Brigade rounding off training at the end of February, and then loading stores and arms in immediate preparation for action.⁵⁶ By marked contrast, Fred Bridgland has conveyed the assessment of a Commandant Gerhard Louw, an armoured vehicle instructor. In Louw's view, insufficient time had been given to the training of novice troops, especially given that they were civilian conscripts rather than regular soldiers, and that the brigade's hurried induction meant that it was not yet properly operational when it was instructed to deploy for action.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Louw recorded his exasperation over ammunition shortages and equipment failures, elements which are, again, glossed over in the Romer-Heitman record.

Louw, who was then appointed to command this 82nd South African Brigade, goes so far as to assert that his armoured force was too under-equipped to constitute a viable tank regiment, even though the pending action was set to be led by a strong tank squadron.⁵⁸ If the levels of deficiency described by Commander Louw are not exaggerated, these circumstances certainly suggest that the SADF was inadequately prepared for the carrying out of Operation Packer. Moreover, when interviewed by Leopold Scholtz, this sceptically-minded officer described his insufficiently-trained force as having been entirely unprepared for the extreme circumstances produced by a situation of live combat. Using highly disparaging terms, both racist and condescending, Louw described the Citizen Force troops placed under him as having been as "excited as naïve children before a picnic; afterwards many were ready for trauma counselling".⁵⁹ In agreeing with his critical assessment of the poor level of military

⁵³ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 319

⁵⁴ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp 320

⁵⁵ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 264

⁵⁶ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 264

⁵⁷ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 321

⁵⁸ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 323

⁵⁹ Scholtz, Leopold. "The Lessons of the Border War." Pp.327

preparedness, Scholtz goes so far as to label the decisions to mount operations as “tactical madness”.⁶⁰

As has already been noted, the Packer offensive was in a way yet another extension of Moduler, with its primary operational objective unchanged, that of clearing all FAPLA forces east of the Cuito River. The rationale remained that of preventing FAPLA from mounting an offensive against an unprotected UNITA, after the SADF withdrawal from Angola. In that respect, the period after the second South African attack on the Tumpo position was a time of growing concern over the possibility of another FAPLA build-up, as SADF reconnaissance had spotted bridging equipment being transported from Menongue in the direction of Cuito Cuanavale.⁶¹ This suggested that FAPLA was preparing to bolster its river bridgehead, possibly in preparation for the resumption of an offensive against UNITA. This increased pressure on the SADF for its Operation Packer to be effective. Yet its brigade was now up against a formidable enemy that had withstood two assaults and was confident in its defences, having witnessed the difficulties experienced by its South African opponents in trying to traverse the minefields and forbidding terrain that lay between them.

The third South African attack on the Tumpo triangle was scheduled for 23 March. Employing a feint manoeuvre to try to deceive the Angolan forces, the plan was to hit the FAPLA position with a strong frontal assault. This planned advance, however, soon ran into heavy weather. Before getting anywhere close to engaging its adversary, the SADF became stuck in minefields which had to be cleared in a lengthy and hard-going operation. With its tanks immobilised by mines and under fire from MiGs and artillery, the SADF could make little forward progress.⁶² Bowing to the inevitable, Louw requested that the attack be called off as it was likely that his tanks would run out of fuel before reaching any FAPLA positions, and was given authorisation to pull back.⁶³ Although nearly all the immobilised tanks were safely retrieved, and there were no South African casualties, the assault had obviously failed.⁶⁴ In effect, this offensive approach had simply run out of steam.

Having failed to dislodge FAPLA forces from their stronghold on the east bank of the Cuito, the SADF resorted to barricading the area in an effort to enable UNITA to defend it without South Africa’s expeditionary military assistance.⁶⁵ This took the form of creating a belt of mines that spanned the riverbanks on either side of the FAPLA bridgehead. Once UNITA was in a secure

⁶⁰ Scholtz, Leopold. "The Lessons of the Border War." pp 328

⁶¹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 270

⁶² Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 279

⁶³ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 279

⁶⁴ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 280

⁶⁵ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 281

position to oversee this mine strip, its ally would be able to withdraw. FAPLA, meanwhile, had not grasped the SADF intentions of withdrawing, and had begun preparing for an attack from the south, given that its enemy had failed three times to make inroads from the east. On its political stage, FAPLA also staged a theatrical show of some abandoned South African tanks, displayed in propaganda as a symbol of Luanda's which would be used as part of their victory propaganda over the SADF.⁶⁶ The rest of March and most of April saw a large-scale South African withdrawal, leaving behind only a formation of experienced regular soldiers. While the continuing SADF presence impressed upon FAPLA that Pretoria's forces were still in Angola, it was in effect a factor that eased along the final stage of the "Angolan Campaign", known as Operation Displace.

Operation Displace took place in the context of the South African belief that the basic campaign goals had been achieved. What remained of the FAPLA forces on the east bank of the Cuito numbered only about 850 men, a far cry from the 15 000 troops who had been marshalled for fighting in the offensive against UNITA. In Pretoria's view, a further major assault on UNITA was unlikely, and the heavy casualties that had been inflicted upon FAPLA and its allies had obliged Luanda, Havana and Moscow to come to the negotiating table.⁶⁷ These tentative negotiations began in earnest in May 1988, while in the background the SADF troops assigned to Operation Displace buckled down to assisting UNITA to try to maintain whatever ground been achieved since Pretoria's intervention in the previous year.

The position of the SADF now was delicate. On the one hand, it could not embark on any action that might jeopardise the negotiations or weaken Pretoria's political position. On the other, it also needed to make certain that FAPLA would not exploit the diplomatic negotiations as a screen behind which to resume its stalled offensive against UNITA.⁶⁸ To try to hold the balance, the SADF commenced mining the eastern bank of the Cuito to bottle up the opposing forces at the Tumpo triangle, and to protect this operation a combat battalion was stationed in a forward position in an attempt to convince FAPLA observers that an attack from the south was if the offing.⁶⁹ Such deception was an integral aspect of Operation Displace. For although the main body of its forces had already left Angola, the SADF was needed to keep up pressure on FAPLA in order to maintain leverage in the negotiations. Thus, an infantry grouping was assigned to maintain radio communications and to practice simulated movements to create the ruse that the main South African Brigade was still active in Angolan territory.⁷⁰ And once strict regulation

⁶⁶ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 282

⁶⁷ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 285

⁶⁸ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 285

⁶⁹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 286

⁷⁰ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 287

of military activity was imposed after 2 July, it became of the utmost political importance that South Africa keep equipment safe, avoid avoid casualties, and not have any prisoners taken by FAPLA. Crucially, nothing should be undertaken which might provoke a FAPLA attack.⁷¹ On this low-level basis, Operation Displace was to continue, with its command placed in the tricky position of having to simulate a menacing presence without provoking any form of FAPLA retaliation. By August, the intricate regional negotiations were coming to an end, and with that came the end of Operation Displace as well as the end of Pretoria's controversial support for UNITA.⁷²

The final battle of the Angolan conflict was not triggered by South Africa, but was instead created by Fidel Castro. It occurred well after the conclusion of negotiations, with Chester Crocker's 'Linkage' resolution accepted and both Cuba and South Africa set on withdrawing their forces from Angolan soil. Yet to press home the image of a valiant Cuban victory over apartheid South Africa and its Western capitalist backers, Castro wished to conclude the war in a triumphal manner. Those Cuban forces still in Angola were positioned to attack Calueque in the far south, the strategic location on the Kunene river to which the SADF had been pulled back, again to protect the Ruacana power station on the Angolan border during the South African evacuation into northern South West Africa. Following intense fighting, towards the end of June, South Africa withdrew its forces. Instead of pushing on with their attack, the Cubans, too, opted to pull back.⁷³ Pretoria's withdrawal was sufficient for a claim of victory, although Havana's forces had incurred considerable losses, with South African intelligence estimates claiming over 300 Cuban casualties.⁷⁴ This notwithstanding, Cuba sought to drive home its proclaimed ascendancy at the conclusion of the Angolan border war crisis, following up its costly ground attack with an air raid on Calueque, striking the dam bridge.⁷⁵ This effective air raid was also exploited as a mark of Cuba's victory in Angola.

With that, hostilities finally wound down, and the troublesome issue of the war in Angola and armed struggle across this portion of Southern Africa was concluded at the negotiations table. Talks in Geneva in early August set an agreed timetable for withdrawal, with the start of September fixed as the deadline for South Africa to have extricated itself from Angola entirely.⁷⁶ On 22 December a trilateral agreement was signed by Cuba, South Africa, and Angola, guaranteeing early independence for South West Africa (Namibia) and the withdrawal from the region of Cuban forces. Officially, the war was over, and as expeditionary military parties to the

⁷¹ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 293

⁷² Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 294

⁷³ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 305

⁷⁴ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 305

⁷⁵ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 306

⁷⁶ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 309

internal crisis of power in Angola, both Pretoria and Havana were able to withdraw from the territory in a clean and peaceable fashion.

Chapter Four:

The Defenders of Cuito Cuanavale

This chapter will consider contrasting accounts of the events of the Angolan border war by examining some of the essential arguments and statements presented by those who believe that the SADF suffered a crushing defeat in Angola and, in almost all cases, specifically at Cuito Cuanavale. All of these are couched as scholarly works or as informed newspaper articles by expert observers and commentators who have been providing authoritative viewpoints, whether academic or political. These works are representative of an uncomplicated Angolan war narrative resting upon a simple judgment of a SADF failure or defeat, with many of their authors citing one other, suggesting an influential field of shared reinforcement. What follows will merely outline the claims and their manner of presentation, while the following chapter will contrast these perspectives with those presented by SADF records and a selection of secondary sources.

We commence with the writings of Ronnie Kasrils, focusing on a piece which was published in the Johannesburg *Sunday Independent* and which was later expanded into a more scholarly appraisal. Kasrils puts forward a common and recurring theme of a turning point in Angola having been the action at Cuito Cuanavale, going so far as to quote Fidel Castro as saying, "The history of Africa will be written as before and after Cuito Cuanavale".¹ Kasrils bases his support for this claim based on what he calls the outcomes of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. These were, apparently, that the SADF "had been forced to withdraw; the independence of Namibia had been agreed," with the implication that this in turn had been crucial in helping to set the scene for the end of apartheid in South Africa.² In his account of the events leading up to the struggle around Cuito Cuanavale, Ronnie Kasrils proclaims that conquest and occupation was an SADF objective, disregarding a contrary view provided to him in person by General Kat Liebenberg.³ In dismissing it, the claim is made that occupying Cuito Cuanavale would have placed UNITA in an "advantageous position".⁴ In support of his view that the actual objective of overrunning and taking the town was revealed by the SADF's heavy use of artillery and waves of infantry attacks by "crack" battalions, with UNITA soldiers serving as cannon fodder ahead of advancing white

¹ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." *The Sunday Independent* (2008): 13. pp.1

² Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp.1

³ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp.2

⁴ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp. 2

troops, this author asserts that South Africa had fielded a force of as many as 6000 men, not counting the accompanying UNITA contingent.⁵

Although Kasrils concedes that many of the SADF's campaign accounts furnish 'meticulous' detail on what has happened in the field, what matters ultimately for this critical commentator is that the town of Cuito was never occupied by the SADF. In his sole description of the actual episode, it is one of a defiant stand against the odds in which Angolan defenders saved the day in an action reminiscent of the Second World War's Battle of Stalingrad in 1942.⁶ The military victory by the Cuban-Angolan alliance is further underlined by the final bombing of the Ruacana and Calueque hydro-electric dam site, demonstrating that the SADF had been clearly out-foxed by Fidel Castro.⁷ Continuing with the theme of Cuban ascendancy, Kasrils applauds what he identifies as the strategic restraint of the Cubans, who could ostensibly have marched on and down into Namibia and liberated it, but instead chose to hold back so as not to undermine the diplomatic negotiations which were then in progress. At the same time, these were characterised as being of little consequence at that stage, judged to be achieving little and of going nowhere.⁸

It is arguable that Ronnie Kasrils was less than fully informed about the terms and practicalities of the regional negotiations towards the end of the 1980s. In observing, as he does, that the SADF had been obliged to withdraw completely from Angola before Cuban forces had begun their own pull-out, it ought to be remembered that the conditions of the negotiations had stipulated this very outcome.⁹ Yet, drawing on an argument of Pierro Gleijeses, Kasrils echoes the contention that the regional negotiations were fated not to have a satisfactory outcome for Pretoria, concluding, "South Africa must face the fact that it will not obtain at the negotiating table what it could not achieve on the battlefield".¹⁰ Revealing his wider purpose in focusing on the Angolan crisis as an exemplary case of progress in the struggle against the apartheid state, Ronnie Kasrils emphasises the importance of making the youth of South Africa aware of the sacrifices that Cuba made for their freedom and independence.

Picking up on the theme conveyed in Kasrils's writing, Isaac Saney's "African Stalingrad" is clearly unambiguous in its interpretation of the significance of that episode in the Angolan hostilities. Saney's aim is to show that literature sceptical of a SADF defeat in Angola is inaccurate, and that it holds a denialist view about the actual outcome of the battle of Cuito

⁵ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp.3

⁶ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp.3

⁷ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp.4

⁸ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp.4

⁹ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp.5

¹⁰ Kasrils, Ronnie. "Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale." pp. 5

Cuanavale – for, as a contest, it was resolved in the favour of the republic’s adversaries. Saney also builds up the significance of the “battle” of Cuito Cuanavale, calling it the largest battle in Africa since World War II.¹¹ An obvious part of Isaac Saney’s purpose in writing an account of Cuito Cuanavale is to tell the allegedly “untold”¹² story of Cuban aid to Angola and its role in a South African defeat. The SADF has, according to Saney, been attempting to convince general opinion that the battle of Cuito Cuanavale was a victory, as the scale of its reversal would have weakened its perceived position of supreme armed power in Southern Africa.¹³ In this writer’s view, there is a lack of other thorough research on the topic to substantiate his interpretations, although as even just the present chapter demonstrates, there is no shortage of similar narratives.¹⁴

Saney dismisses the notion that the South Africans had no really express intention of occupying Cuito Cuanavale as a construction of historical hindsight, intended to deny the importance of the “battle”, and its role as an important stage on the road towards the final dissolution of apartheid.¹⁵ That position, he argues, is in direct contradiction to the outcome of the Cuito encounter which led to the end of regional destabilisation at the hands of the apartheid government. The defeat at Cuito Cuanavale stemmed the hegemonic ambitions of South Africa, affecting not only the SADF war effort in Angola, but also Pretoria’s influence in all of the other Southern African countries that were being manipulated by the apartheid government.¹⁶ For Isaac Saney, Cuba represented an altruistic force in Africa affairs, thereby legitimising its aid to the MPLA in Angola and its belligerent participation in the war.

He argues that while Cuba’s aid to Luanda has been dismissed as having been that of a Soviet proxy, the Cubans were actually acting against the wishes of a more cautious Soviet Union. Indeed, Cuba’s interventions in Africa were so patently principled and selfless that it acquired no economic gains through the potential leverage it acquired through the supply of military missions.¹⁷ As to the Cuito Cuanavale question, the battle there is seen as pivotal by Saney, as in his perspective the South Africans were determined on its capture as they needed the use of the town as a forward airbase. To that end, Saney asserts that Pretoria fielded its best troops and strongest firepower to obtain a decisive victory and thus change the course of the war.¹⁸ To back

¹¹ Saney, Isaac. “African Stalingrad: The Cuban Revolution, Internationalism, and the End of Apartheid.” *Latin American Perspectives* 33 (2006). pp.81

¹² Saney published in 2006, whilst articles by Castro, Fidel. “Paying Our Debt to Humanity.” pp. on the subject were published in 1989. This story is by no means untold.

¹³ Saney, Isaac. “African Stalingrad. pp. 82

¹⁴ Saney, Isaac. “African Stalingrad. pp.83

¹⁵ Saney, Isaac. “African Stalingrad. pp. 83

¹⁶ Saney, Isaac. “African Stalingrad. pp. 85

¹⁷ Saney, Isaac. “African Stalingrad. pp. 91

¹⁸ Saney, Isaac. “African Stalingrad. pp. 101

up this view, he cites the presidential visit of P.W.Botha to the front lines as an implied indication of the weight of the issue for the SADF.¹⁹ As a further part of this picture of South African frustration at this point in the war, Saney also turns to the estimation of Ronnie Kasrils that the SADF had suffered an unacceptably high loss of white conscripts at Cuito Cuanavale.²⁰ The defeat there and the ensuing advance of Cuban troops to the southern Angolan border forced the South Africans to negotiate to protect their soldiers and to prevent any further loss of white South African life.²¹ For all that Saney has to say about the overall meaning of Cuito Cuanavale, he pays no attention to the actualities of the battle itself, aside from concluding that all that mattered is that the SADF lost the action. The rationale of 'African Stalingrad' lies in using a collection of violent events in Southern Africa, then linking them to a battle which is characterised as decisive, and consequently calling them the outcomes of that battle. Or, viewed in another way but through the same lens, the battle of Cuito Cuanavale was akin to Stalingrad simply because it was.

Both of these authors have claimed that the battle of Cuito Cuanavale was instrumental in bringing about the the eventual end of apartheid. This has been hammered home forcefully by Ronnie Kasrils on his African National Congress platform. In that regard, the ANC's stance has been made clear in various actions, speeches, articles, and event attendances at which the Angolan border war has featured. It can perhaps be demonstrated best through the publication, *In Session*. The most illuminating specific issue is that of July 2008 which opens with a piece about the March 2008 commemorations of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. There, the 'Battle of Cuito Cuanavale' is portrayed as having irreversibly changed the course of history and the balance of the political landscape of Southern Africa. The "Angolan, Namibian, and Cuban forces" managed to bring the apartheid offensive in Angola to a decisive halt.²² The FAPLA/Cuban alliance, constituted as the "Southern African Liberation Armies", had fought successfully against "Angolan Rebel armies", as well as invading "apartheid armies". This joint defense of Cuito Cuanavale led to a peace settlement, from which the independence of Namibia was won, and which set in train the pressures for the negotiated settlement which was responsible for the ending of apartheid in South Africa in the 1990s. Praise is heaped upon the potent force of an assembled "internationalism" which "inspired and informed the South African liberation", an implicit reference to Cuba and its supportive presence behind the MPLA government in Angola. The lauded 'Cuban narrative' is also given a prominent voice in *In Session*, represented there by Major-General Espirito Santo who repeats the standard contention made by figures such as

¹⁹ Saney, Isaac. "African Stalingrad. pp. 102

²⁰ Saney, Isaac. "African Stalingrad. pp. 103

²¹ Saney, Isaac. "African Stalingrad. pp. 105

²² "Cuito Cuanavale Commemoration." *In Session* (2008). Web. 27 Nov. 2015 pp. 6
<http://www.parliament.gov.za/content/in-session%2015.08.081~1~1.pdf>

Castro himself, and by Jorge Risquet, about the altruistic nature of Havana's aid to Africa and its high-minded motives.²³ Although the claim is made that all sides of the political equation were represented at the 2008 commemorative event, there is little evidence of the voices of SADF regular veterans and of Citizen Force soldiers who had fought on the side of the apartheid state. Although the call was for an inclusive history which recognised the roles of all South Africa's people, it is apparent that Angolan war commemoration – or that of twenty years on, in any event - was not destined to be one common to *all* the people of the republic.

Separately, the ANC also published an Angolan anniversary statement in March 2008, in which a basic description of the 'Battle of Cuito Cuanavale' is provided and the claim of a Cuban-Angolan victory is made. This victory is depicted as having marked a turning point in the war of aggression against the Angolan people, as well as in laying the foundations for an independent Namibia and the end of apartheid in South Africa.²⁴ Here, too, there is a statement that war veterans "from both sides" made up South Africa's party at the commemorative event, although, again, SADF veterans seem to have been conspicuous by their absence. In a press release accompanying the ANC's anniversary declaration, the claim was made, yet again, that South Africa had been freed due to the gallant actions of those who had lost their lives fighting off the apartheid army at the 'Battle for Cuito Cuanavale'.

A further challenge to the SADF's version of its experience of warfare in Angola is, "Paying our debt to Humanity", attributed to Fidel Castro himself, and forming part of a collection edited by the American scholar and Cuban specialist, David Deutschmann. His 1989 volume, *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia*, focuses squarely on Cuba and its influence in the Angolan conflict, the established building block of all the assembled authors in their common challenge to what is depicted as an entirely hollow and propagandistic SADF version of what had transpired in the Angolan conflict.

Castro furnishes an emotive and triumphalist re-telling of the Angolan quagmire, proclaiming that Cuban volunteers had arrived in Angola in 1975 to help that country's leadership in its fight against the threat of a South African invasion, which was repelled in the following year. Thereafter, in Castro's view, it was the commencement of the beginnings of a Cuban withdrawal that provided a window for the South Africans to invade, now able to take advantage of Angola's dangerously weakened military defences.²⁵ Pretoria's motivation was the waging of what Castro terms a "dirty war" against Angola, with the backing of the United States, so as to leave the

²³ "Cuito Cuanavale Commemoration." In session. pp.7

²⁴ "ANC commemorates the battle of Cuito Cuanavale" <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=5990>. 27 Nov.2015

²⁵ "Paying Our Debt to Humanity." In *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia*, edited by David Deutschmann, by Fidel Castro, 1. Melbourne, Vic., Australia: Ocean Press, 1989. Pp. 106

decisive balance of regional power in the hands of the South Africans. This was to form the status quo in Angola until the emergence of a crisis in 1987, precipitated by a FAPLA offensive against UNITA. Cuban forces are distanced from having had any hand in this offensive, although Castro sees it as having been the “undeniable” right of the Angolan government to carry out such offensives against the threat of its UNITA enemy.²⁶

In the eyes of Havana, it appears that any such MPLA offensive could only have been successful or should only have been undertaken on the basis of certainty that there would be no military intervention by South Africa. In the event, this offensive which was undertaken against Cuban advice, provoked an expeditionary intervention by the SADF which went beyond merely turning the FAPLA advance on Mavinga, but itself became an advance on Cuito Cuanavale.²⁷ Faced with this desperate situation, Luanda turned to Cuba which had no alternative but to supply the MPLA with reinforcements. Circumstances had deteriorated so badly by November 1987 that Cuba was virtually obliged to take spontaneous action. Strategically, its command had little choice. Aside from avoiding a decisive battle with the SADF, the South Africans could not be permitted to obliterate the Angolan brigades and then to capture Cuito Cuanavale.²⁸ This scenario assumed that had the SADF been able to overcome defending FAPLA forces east of the Cuito, River, it would then have moved on to take the town. In response, Cuban planning was apparently to delay the SADF and to turn Cuito Cuanavale into a trap into which, according to Castro, the South Africans fell completely.²⁹

According to Castro, the defence of Cuito Cuanavale blocked the SADF with a “minimum of casualties” for the defending forces, and that South Africa’s objectives were completely foiled.³⁰ The effective defensive plan was to hold enemy forces at their river position and then to attack from the south west. With that having occurred at Calueque, these parting shots clinched the finalising of negotiations.³¹ In Castro’s opinion, although high-level Southern African talks had been underway for a lengthy period, Pretoria had been paying them virtually no attention, given its obsessive concentration on finding a military solution to its difficulties in the region. It was only after the balance of power in Angola had tilted against South Africa that it went to the negotiating table properly.

The outcome of those negotiations were accepted only because they suited Cuba’s aspirations and image. Confirming a South African withdrawal from Angola and securing the independence

²⁶ Castro, Fidel. “Paying Our Debt to Humanity.” pp. 107

²⁷ Castro, Fidel. “Paying Our Debt to Humanity.” pp. 107

²⁸ Castro, Fidel. “Paying Our Debt to Humanity.” pp. 109

²⁹ Castro, Fidel. “Paying Our Debt to Humanity.” pp. 110

³⁰ Castro, Fidel. “Paying Our Debt to Humanity.” pp. 110

³¹ Castro, Fidel. “Paying Our Debt to Humanity.” pp. 110

of Namibia were part of fulfilling Cuba's duty to the liberation of humankind, and the ending of Havana's Southern African obligations were of the greatest benefit to Cuba's standing as an independent non-imperialist state.³² For the Cuban mission in Angola was motivated by nothing more altruism and fraternity.

Changing the History of Africa also contains a revealing interview with Jorge Risquet, one of the founders of the Cuban communist party and an influential associate of Fidel Castro. Heavily involved in the affairs of Cuba in Africa, he was its representative at the tripartite negotiations surrounding the conclusion of the Angolan hostilities. Risquet's interview responses to David Deutschmann back up a distinctive and standard Cuban interpretation of its intervention and action in sub-Saharan Africa. In relation to Havana's initial decision to aid the MPLA in the mid-1970s against a South African incursion, there are said to have been no doubts about the provision of aid. Cuba acted because it was necessary, possible, and because *not* acting would have amounted to a negligent "crime against humanity".³³

Such selfless solidarity has come to be based on a bond between Cuba and Africa, bearing in mind the earlier origin of many Cuban people as African slaves transported in chains across the Atlantic. The assumption of a natural Cuban solidarity with African countries serves as a crucial element in legitimising any intervention by Havana in the affairs of the continent. In response to a question about the major threat faced by Southern Africa in 1975, Jorge Risquet's view is that if Angola 'fell' to its underhand political opponents, the consequences would have been the loss of its post-colonial independence to South Africa, after which other Southern African countries would soon have been facing the same fate.³⁴ In its way, this was a strikingly similar analogy to the position of a Western capitalist state like the United States, with its fixation of the 'domino effect' and the need to check the threatening spread of communism over borders. This was also, in turn, an echo of the belief that the South African government held about the communist menace of the MPLA in Luanda – that it was potentially contagious, and could spread beyond the borders of an independent Angola.

On the issue of a Cuban military presence in the territory, Risquet's perspective is tied in with his understanding of timing or of the importance of particular dates. The UN Security Council Resolution 435, calling for the withdrawal of South African forces from Angola, and for the independence of Namibia, was adopted at the end of September 1978, well after Cuba had put its foot into Angola. As is established knowledge, this pressurising resolution was supported by

³² Castro, Fidel. "Paying Our Debt to Humanity." pp. 114

³³ "Interview with Jorge Risquet." In *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia*, edited by David Deutschmann, by David Deutschman, 1. Melbourne, Vic., Australia: Ocean Press, 1989. Pp. 13

³⁴ Deutschman, David. "Interview with Jorge Risquet." pp.14

Western powers which in previous international circumstance would have been softer on South Africa. However, before any real movement could take place, there was a change in leadership in Washington. With the accession of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 America inaugurated the policies of 'Linkage' and 'Constructive Engagement' which, in practice, eased pressure on South African.³⁵ The proposition of Linkage which eventually came to be applauded in diplomatic quarters as the tool that ended the conflict satisfactorily, appears to have been used earlier more to maintain hostilities.

For Risquet, the Cuban presence was never an actual obstacle to Namibian independence as the Linkage framework suggested, but that the United States insisted it was, purely to permit its South African ally and its regional interests more 'breathing room'. At another level, though, this Cuban political notable does not share the Ronnie Kasrils view that the external South African defeat brought on the the end of the apartheid order. Although certain of the SADF defeat and of its impact on the rest of the continent, the toppling of apartheid could only have been a consequence of "the work of the people of South Africa themselves".³⁶ Equally, South Africa's failure at Cuito Cuanavale still altered the balance of power and conveyed major implications for what lay immediately ahead. While Luanda had been urging on negotiations strongly towards the end of 1987, the strength of Pretoria's military presence on its territory meant that South Africa could always retain an upper hand in any dealings.³⁷ But the SADF's serious loss in its campaign shifted power decisively into the hands of Cuba and Angola, thereby forcing the South Africans to engage more seriously in negotiations, and to accept that the resolution to the crisis lay more in diplomatic dealing, rather than in any military solution that now lay beyond its weakened grasp.³⁸ In other respects, Jorge Risquet's sentiments echo those of Fidel Castro in its depiction of the high-minded motivations behind Cuban intervention, and in its shared assumption that South Africa's forces lost the battle for Cuito Cuanavale.

The Cuban version of events is further backed up by Pierro Gleijeses, in his book *Visions of freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the struggle for Southern Africa 1976-1991*. This book follows *Conflicting Missions*, but starts before and ends after, as well as moving the focus away from Cuban internationalism and placing it upon the events that surrounded the Angolan war, and the eventual independence of Namibia. Aside from merely repeating the claims made by Castro, and Risquet (Gleijeses primary source was the Cuban archives, and his versions will be heavily influenced by the access of this information) Gleijeses goes on to make some bolder claims, some of which are damaging to the Cuban – Soviet relationship. The first of these claims

³⁵ Deutschman, David. "Interview with Jorge Risquet." pp.18

³⁶ Deutschman, David. "Interview with Jorge Risquet." pp.23

³⁷ Deutschman, David. "Interview with Jorge Risquet." pp. 30

³⁸ Deutschman, David. "Interview with Jorge Risquet." pp.32

is in regards to Soviet lead offensive in 1987 against UNITA. Risquet and Castro both said they had advised against it and not been listened to. Gleijeses states that General Arnaldo Ochoa (Cuban) had met with General Konstantin Shaganovich (Soviet) and presented him with the reason for why there should be no offensive, after which Ochoa was able to report back to Havana that Operation Salute to October had definitely been abandoned.³⁹ According to Gleijeses: “Konstantin had lied to Ochoa”⁴⁰. There are no reasons provided for this deception, nor has it crept up in the social histories of the Soviets in Angola, what is more bizarre is that Gleijeses goes on to further claim that General Konstantin Shaganovich, who is mentioned by other authors, never existed in the first place.⁴¹ According to Gleijeses Konstantin Shaganovich, is a confusion between an already did Soviet General who lead the efforts in Angola until 1980, and a Moscow based strategist named Konstantin Kurochkin.⁴²

A large focus by Gleijeses is that of the relationship between the Soviets and Cuba, in *Conflicting Missions* he set out to show that Cuba was not merely a proxy of the Soviet Union and it seems that theme continues here by detailing the breakdown in the two states relationship. The Cubans felt that the Soviet lead assault was going to trigger an escalation from the SADF, and due to complex negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union regarding the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, it was unlikely the Soviets would directly intervene to prevent the MPLA from losing power to the South African backed UNITA forces.⁴³ To this end Castro decided that Cuba would have to act alone, and then inform Moscow afterwards, this could have put a strain on the détente between the United States and the Soviet Union, as Cuba was seen as an extension of the Soviets and this affected even more the Soviet – Cuba tensions.⁴⁴

Gleijeses does not give Cutio Cuanavale as much attention as you would expect coming from such a heavy Cuban focused narrative. He brings the focus back to fixation on the Cuban air superiority, and claims that this made taking out the SADF G-5 artillery guns easy.⁴⁵ Aside from this Gleijeses merely adds that Cutio was a victory for Havana and FAPLA, because FAPLA had not been crushed and Cutio had not been occupied, as this is what they believed were the goals of the SADF.⁴⁶

³⁹ Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the struggle for southern Africa, 1976-1991*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp.393

⁴⁰ Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of freedom*. Pp. 394

⁴¹ Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of freedom*. Pp.394

⁴² Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of freedom*. Pp.395

⁴³ Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of freedom*. Pp.407

⁴⁴ Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of freedom*. Pp.413

⁴⁵ Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of freedom*. Pp.424

⁴⁶ Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of freedom*. Pp.425

The last of the conventional narratives we shall consider is a book-length study by the international politics scholar, Horace Campbell, *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. Its introduction alone paints a picture of Angolan events which is perhaps even more stark than that associated with partisan Cuban authors. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale* contends that a South African army comprised of over 9000 troops became trapped at Cuito Cuanavale after losing air support and having to deal with disorder caused by a series of mutinies by supporting black UNITA troops. P.W. Botha's visit to the front could be attributed to panic over a breakdown in SADF command structures, and South African propaganda had claimed that Cuito Cuanavale had fallen, even though its defences had not even come close to having been breached.⁴⁷ The South African attacks in January, February and March were all repelled by joint Angolan-Cuban forces which inflicted heavy losses on their enemy. That, added to the "confidence" instilled in the Angolan troops, saw an energised FAPLA laying down supporting airstrips for aircraft to enforce the trap into which the SADF had fallen. It all pushed their adversary into a crushing defeat.

Beyond the military conflict, Horace Campbell asserts that on-going negotiations were being manipulated by South Africa to try to undermine UN Resolution 435, but that this manoeuvring had to adapt to the acceptance of a peaceful settlement after the Angolan victory in March.⁴⁸ South Africa was unable to withdraw from the trap in which it had landed until September 1988, when its pull-out was secured by negotiations. Here, once again, Campbell also implies that the battle of Cuito Cuanavale can be linked directly to the fall of apartheid and to the freeing of Nelson Mandela. Ahead of that moment, apartheid South Africa's attitude towards Angola, its stubbornness in persisting with its doomed campaign there, and its defeat, reveals a critical lack of understanding of its own position at a time when the whole world was in opposition to apartheid.

In his detailed central account of the Angolan hostilities, Horace Campbell adopts a less polemical approach, although in his reconstruction of the military story it could be said that he makes some elementary errors, such as failing to take into proper account what might be termed South Africa's 'way of war' in its Angolan campaign, an emphasis on movement which saw a shift by the SADF from conventional warfare to the tactics of mobile warfare.⁴⁹ Given the natural focus on Cuito Cuanavale, there is a tendency to exaggerate the SADF strength in this action, something which obviously helps to underline the magnitude of South Africa's defeat. Thus, Campbell puts 9 battalions into the assault there, whereas these formations were at no

⁴⁷ Campbell, Horace. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1990. pp. 1

⁴⁸ Campbell, Horace. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. pp. 1

⁴⁹ Campbell, Horace. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. pp. 8, although the battles at Tumpo (Cuito Cuanavale) could be classified as Conventional.

stage operating simultaneously within Angola.⁵⁰ When it comes to estimating losses, those sustained by FAPLA are largely dismissed as being light, whereas Campbell's history claims that by the end of December 1987 South Africa had lost almost 250 soldiers, not counting heavy UNITA casualties, over forty aircraft, and almost three dozen vehicles. For this tally, there is no source verification.⁵¹

In similar vein, according to this treatment the campaigning strains in 1987 brought on a breakdown in South Africa's command structures because there was a division in leadership about committing more troops to a war which it appeared that it was on the way to losing. This lay behind the visit by P.W. Botha, a salvage intervention to restore agreed authority and order.⁵² It is then suggested that it was at this same time that the Angolans turned to the Cubans for aid, when by then Havana's forces were already stationed in Cuito Cuanavale, with none other than Castro himself in charge of the overall military effort being mounted by FAPLA forces. Indeed, Campbell makes it clear later in his own reconstruction that Fidel Castro was crucially involved in directing the chain of command in the field at a number of key points in the hostilities, including the action at Tumpo.

Against this back drop of a strong Cuban narrative, there is a strange yet illuminating counter narrative, which comes from within the same camp. It comes in the form of social histories done by Russians, looking back at the days of the Soviet Union. Two sets of accounts, from mostly Soviet translators stationed around the Cuito area, repeat the same themes. But what is most astounding is firstly, that the Soviet experience mimics that of the South Africans (seemingly minus the respect of the Angolans), and secondly that they do not portray Cuba in the light that Castro's internationalist narrative would like.

The Soviets who were positioned at Cuito are able to give a good impression of what the 'town' was like, one such description is that it was not so much a town, but rather a settlement, merely an outpost for the MPLA government forces to use as a launchpad for strikes into UNITA territory.⁵³ Another is that there were very few local men, as men from any village or town had been conscripted, either by FAPLA or UNITA regardless of their ideologies.⁵⁴ The few people that did live there, were only there because of the garrison and would not have been able to sustain themselves if not for the military presence.⁵⁵ By all accounts the living around Cuito

⁵⁰ Campbell, Horace. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. pp. 22

⁵¹ Campbell, Horace. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. pp. 23

⁵² Campbell, Horace. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. pp. 23

⁵³ Shubin, Gennady. *Cuito Cuanavale: frontline accounts by Soviet soldiers*. Auckland Park: Jacana, 2014. Pp.34

⁵⁴ Shubin, G. V., and A. A. Tokarev. *Bush war: the road to Cuito Cuanavale: Soviet Soldiers accounts of the Angolan war*. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011. Pp.25

⁵⁵ Shubin, G. V., and A. A. Tokarev. *Bush war*. Pp.25

Cuanavale would have become very unpleasant after the South African intervention, as between 1986-1989 the 'town' was essentially blitzed by SADF artillery fire.^{56 57} This seems to be the stand-out memory of the Soviets, the constant artillery fire is present in almost every account I have read. It is also clear that three powers (Cuba, USSR, Angola) forces did not mingle. The Cubans stayed firmly on the West bank of the river⁵⁸, and the Soviets soon realised that if they moved their camp away from the Angolans they stopped being the target of the SADF shelling.⁵⁹

The Soviet accounts also show how little they thought of the Angolans, they believed that part of why they had such poor intelligence (military) is because the FAPLA forces were pretending to conduct reconnaissance.⁶⁰ This would take the form of the squad being given their orders, they move out into the dense undergrowth, camp for a night or two and then return with nothing to report. The Soviets also resented that the Angolans seemed to ignore their orders, and this continued until the Cubans arrived.⁶¹ The Angolans also later accused the Soviets of "sending them to the slaughterhouse"⁶², which is an interesting foil to the claim that the SADF used the UNITA soldiers as cannon fodder during the assaults on the Tumpo triangle.

The strained relationship between Cuba and the USSR is also visible in the Soviet accounts, although not a soldier to soldier level. Upon arrival, the Cubans set about laying minefields, approximately 10,000 mines were laid in the Tumpo Triangle region, but the Cubans did not disclose their locations to either the Soviets or FAPLA.⁶³ A further breakdown can be seen in the aftermath of Cuito Cuanavale the Cubans mass produced medals of honor which were distributed to anyone stationed in the town, however, any Soviet who accepted one of these medals did not receive any recognition from Moscow for their service in Angola.^{64 65}

Ultimately going through the boots on the ground memories of the Soviets, does not mirror the narrative that we would expect to find, but rather we see that the Soviets felt a greater connection to the SADF forces, and their experiences than to their Cuban and Angolan allies.

Against this condensed survey of what might be termed a left understanding of the significance of Cuito Cuanavale as a 'turning point', we can assess the claims made by the preceding authors included in this chapter in terms of their reasoning, the reliability of their

⁵⁶ Shubin, G. V., and A. A. Tokarev. *Bush war*. Pp.28

⁵⁷ Shubin, Gennady. *Cuito Cuanavale*. Pp. 127-128

⁵⁸ Shubin, G. V., and A. A. Tokarev. *Bush war*. Pp.30

⁵⁹ Shubin, Gennady. *Cuito Cuanavale*. Pp.119

⁶⁰ Shubin, Gennady. *Cuito Cuanavale*. Pp.152

⁶¹ Shubin, Gennady. *Cuito Cuanavale*. Pp.159

⁶² Shubin, Gennady. *Cuito Cuanavale*. Pp.186

⁶³ Shubin, Gennady. *Cuito Cuanavale*. Pp.160

⁶⁴ Shubin, G. V., and A. A. Tokarev. *Bush war*. Pp.147

⁶⁵ Shubin, Gennady. *Cuito Cuanavale*. Pp.190

evidence, and their possible motives as reflected in the lines taken by their accounts. This can be compared to contrasting literature that is perceived to be 'pro-SADF', to decide on whether these viewpoints could be judged in terms of any sort of basic historical veracity.

Chapter Five

Weighing up the claims of victory

Thus far, the present study has put forward the perspective of those who subscribe to the SADF's version of the Angolan military picture, has mapped out key aspects of the South African campaign based on SADF records, and has considered some of the positions taken by authors who oppose the official apartheid South African assessment. This next chapter will seek to address various sources. In the case of SADF material, one factor is whether 'insider' secondary sources mesh with available primary sources. The purpose is not to try to establish the complex notion of who – if anyone – can be said to have 'won' the Angolan conflict. Instead, the question is that of whether credibility can be adequately established on the basis of the known historical record.

On the basis of this brief, Helmoed Romer-Heitman's treatment will be treated as an implicit extension of the "Concise History of Operation Moduler", due to his access to this record for his book. If secondary and primary sources combine to reflect a coherent narrative, then some measure of authority can surely be credited. Then, we return to the arguments aired in the preceding chapter, by those authors who disavow the SADF's military achievements. Against this, implicit to this dissertation is an argument that the final resolution to the enmities of the parties involved in Angola represented an outcome favourable to *all* the external powers and to Angola's MPLA government, but that, in the course of the crisis, all internal Angolan groups suffered.

When we examine the broadly pro-SADF material, it is interesting to note its distinct lack of sensationalist political rhetoric - although there are many florid works available, their obvious bias rules them out of serious contention. This is not, of course, to discount the possibility that more restrained or sober-sounding accounts can be said to be wholly 'objective' or impartial. In view of the acute political sensitivity over the mortality count of white South African soldiers, one needs to bear in mind that some figures and statistics may have been massaged in favour of the SADF and at the expense of its FAPLA opponents.

The Concise History of Operation Moduler presents the quintessential argument for the case that South Africa won the border war. It suggests that too much emphasis has been placed on the events of 1988, when the events of 1987 played the most crucial role in attaining the South

African objectives, and in securing South Africa's regional interests.¹ If the overriding objective was to derail the FAPLA offensive against UNITA, and to tilt the power balance so that UNITA could maintain its ground, then the incursion was successful. Phase one of Operation Modular was a string of effective gains for the SADF, statistically and strategically confirming that the war was in effect being won during 1987. Thus, the British journalist and Angolan expert, Fred Bridgland, cites General Jannie Geldenhuys on the SADF's limited objectives at its entry into the war, "It was not our intention to start a war that might end in Luanda and go on forever. We did not want to establish a permanent presence. We did not want to make Angola our Vietnam."² That emphasis explains the evolving nature of the SADF's operational doctrine, a campaign built on light, mobile warfare with which to break FAPLA and then to withdraw. Thus, South Africa's forces at no stage consolidated any position as their own permanent base of operations; instead, they operated from the UNITA stronghold of Mavinga and kept their forces mobile in the battlefield.

Although more overtly political, with his personal views on checking the growth of communism in Southern Africa, and interest in comparing Angola to other Cold War conflicts overseas, General Constand Viljoen's position was similar to that of Jannie Geldenhuys.³ Helmoed Romer-Heitman backs this version, declaring that the SADF objective was to foster negotiations through the force of arms. Modular was itself intended to strengthen Pretoria's position in talks, including the resolving of the Namibia impasse.⁴ A crippling of FAPLA would diminish Luanda's leverage in negotiations.⁵

The *Concise History of Operation Modular's* Appendix, a December 1987 intelligence briefing, reaffirms that the proposed attack guidelines were consistent with those of Operation Hooper, including the requirement that casualties be kept limited.⁶ Aside from the incorporation of operational factors such as the nature of terrain and the manner in which Cuban forces would be likely to respond to an attack, the Cuito Cuanavale town barely features as a target.⁷ The overriding priority is the clearing of FAPLA forces, with the breaking of Cuito defensive works accorded a lower priority.

¹ South African National Defence Force Military Intelligence Archive, Pretoria, J.F. Huyser Collection, Box 30, by Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular Phase one: May -October 1987*. Pp 2

² Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa: Twelve Months That Transformed a Continent*. Gibraltar: Ashanti, 1990. pp. 369

³ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War: 1966-1989*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013. pp. 448

⁴ The South Africans had a grand plan for defeating SWAPO and holding an election which South African sympathisers would win.

⁵ Heitman, H. *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase*. Gibraltar: Ashanti Pub., 1990. pp. 337

⁶ South African National Defence Force Military Intelligence Archive, Pretoria, J.F. Huyser Collection, Box 30, Appendix E To Staff Appreciation of Operation Hooper 26 December 1987. pp.2

⁷ Appendix E To Staff Appreciation of Operation Hooper. pp.17

Phase one of Operation Modular was an undoubted success for the SADF, with the FAPLA offensive halted and its brigades forced rearwards and confined to the Chaminga high ground locality. It was at that point that the visit of State President P.W Botha and his cabinet delegation took place, essentially to put a stamp on a South African campaign success.⁸ In the compilation of the SADF's Angolan *Concise History*, this tour is depicted as a crucial factor in the fortunes of continuing SADF involvement in the territory, as general command was able to utilise it to secure the necessary resources to stiffen its war effort. A consequence was the introduction of the Olifant tank to offset the advantage which FAPLA had been holding with heavier tank squadrons which outnumbered the South Africans in any direct battle confrontations.

In another view, that of Fred Bridgland, the real reason for Botha's visit was alarm in Pretoria over FAPLA's continuing brigade strength and aggressive intentions.⁹ Closer to the action, though, Colonel Deon Ferreira was confident in reassuring the presidential party of SADF preparedness for any hostile enemy movement.¹⁰ For Leopold Scholtz, the significance of the presence of the State President in Mavinga to visit the front lines was, ultimately, that it played into the interests of the general staff who wanted, predictably, the wherewithal to beef up its Angolan expedition.¹¹ On that topic, Helmoed Romer-Heitman also concurs, noting that President Botha's endorsement saw the SADF continuing its operations on a larger scale.¹²

Still, the final flurry of 1987 set the mixed tone for the battles of 1988. The limitations on the SADF, specifically the duration of infantry service, constrained the reach of its operations, for all the rigour and extensiveness of the planning which was a hallmark of the Angolan campaign. Planning of phase two, and the operational instructions of 6 October, focused on the obliteration of enemy forces east of the Cuito River. It was important to stop any FAPLA withdrawal across the river, on the basis that once Luanda's forces were out of what was UNITA territory, they would be a less vulnerable target.¹³ This second stage was marked by a failure to stop a FAPLA withdrawal, despite most of the authors cited, with the exception of Scholtz, claiming that the SADF had done well as the casualty rates had been disproportionately high for Luanda. For Leopold Scholtz, a favourable statistical tally could not cover up the fact that the SADF had failed to attain its objectives in this action.¹⁴

⁸ Commandant van Moltke. *A Concise History of Operation Modular*. pp. 72

⁹ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 127

¹⁰ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 128

¹¹ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 279

¹³ Heitman, H. *War in Angola*. pp. 84

¹⁴ Scholtz, Leopold. *The SADF in the Border War*. pp. 297

Phase three is where, at the level of historical interpretation, the most contentious points arise, as it contains the “Battle for Cuito Cuanavale”. The ‘pro-SADF’ literature avoids any notion of *The Battle for Cuito Cuanavale*, as there were several battles that were bound together, if loosely, each being a distinct action, and all for the South Africans having a focus on crushing their enemy, not that of moving into any occupation of territory as a South African jurisdiction. The perception of Cuito Cuanavale as an operational objective, as has already been noted in some detail, was a sometimes hazy factor that dogged the SADF.¹⁵ The generally agreed official position on Cuito Cuanavale was that it was not a pivotal objective, and was only to be seized in the event of it falling easily into the hands of the SADF.¹⁶ For, as has already been suggested, the issues surrounding this Angolan place were complex. South African occupation would have been received poorly in international forums. Subsequent withdrawal would have handed a propaganda gift to Luanda.¹⁷ The SADF occupying a town in Angola, would have been a massive international incident, if we compare it to the Soviet belief that the SADF avoided shelling Soviet positions to avoid some form of international backlash.¹⁸ The SADF’s general staff was mindful of these touchy political considerations, even if those under their command were not. Thus, front-line ground commanders in the field appeared to be aware that if a tactical onslaught was mounted from the west, Cuito Cuanavale could be captured. But any such rush would not be countenanced by the SADF high command.¹⁹

The battles which could be amalgamated together as “the battle for Cuito Cuanavale” do not lend themselves to being depicted as grand military contests, not least in the literature of pro-SADF authors who sketch out the action in exhaustive detail, with Fred Bridgland providing first-person accounts from soldiers and officers from the South African camp. The defences installed by Fidel Castro’s command were so sturdy that the SADF failed even to get within reach of FAPLA forces in at least the last three of these Tumpo Triangle actions. For commanders on the spot, it had become clear that trying to force through the defences would be too costly, even if their own casualties could, as usual, be minimised. Up to then, SADF mortality continued to remain low, with accompanying and unprotected UNITA infantry bearing the brunt of the lethal force of FAPLA artillery. Their lives were cheap as they were of no political consequences in white South Africa. Right to the very end of hostilities, the SADF managed to keep itself remarkably intact. In the Calueque raid and the bombing by Cuban pilots, South

¹⁵ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 93

¹⁶ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 178

¹⁷ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 169

¹⁸ Shubin, Gennady. Cuito Cuanavale: frontline accounts by Soviet soldiers. Auckland Park: Jacana, 2014. Pp. 119

¹⁹ Bridgland, Fred. The War for Africa. pp. 251, Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 311

African forces remained able to resist being pushed away from the hydro-electric plant, sustaining fewer than a dozen casualties.²⁰

Ultimately, involvement in warfare in Angola was a necessity for the creation of a negotiating field upon which South Africa could attempt to find an agreeable political settlement – indeed, the SADF and its FAPLA adversary were still engaged in fighting while the negotiations were underway. For Pretoria, the outlook appeared favourable. By 1988, the spectre of Soviet communism was receding. The condition of a Cuban withdrawal removed the threat to Southern Africa posed by Cuba. The pending election of SWAPO and a newly- independent Namibia was perfectly tolerable as South Africa's grip had held long enough for the Soviet Union menace to be ending.²¹ Moreover, there were further mitigating factors to Pretoria's loss of control over Namibia. In fact, one scholar has gone so far as to suggest that the Namibia settlement was clearly favourable to South Africa. South Africa, as Brian Wood has argued, had adopted an aggressive policy of ensuring that its capital and commercial interests would continue to dominate the Namibian economy. Moreover, it was able to continue to exert power in its neighbouring territory by maintaining Walvis Bay as a strategic South African enclave.²² At the time of independence, Walvis Bay accounted for roughly 90% of Namibia's international shipping trade, as well as approximately 70% of its total exports.²³ This port concession enabled the South Africans to indirectly influence the Namibian economy and the policies of the SWAPO government.

On top of this, Namibian independence heralded the lifting of UN sanctions imposed upon South Africa in relation to Resolution 435, leading to the normalisation of Pretoria's international relations. And the economic and political costs in resources in having to wage an anti-independence war against SWAPO would come to an end. Arguably, then, the Namibian transition was not without some palpable gain for the apartheid state. Beyond Namibia itself, that also included no further onslaught upon UNITA while it was a South African interest, and practice in later negotiations with the ANC in the dismantling of the apartheid order.

In South Africa's Angolan experience, well ahead of that major domestic transition, a noteworthy feature of the sources on its detailed campaign planning is the extent to which projections were at odds with their intended execution and with their envisaged gains. In other words, it is the gap between the campaign objectives of the elimination of FAPLA forces, and the approach dictated by South African Intelligence appreciation of attacks in the Cuito area. For the

²⁰ Heitman, H. War in Angola. pp. 307

²¹ Scholtz, Leopold. The SADF in the Border War. pp. 448

²² Wood, Brian. "Preventing the Vacuum: Determinants of the Namibia Settlement." *Journal of Southern African Studies*: 742-69. Pp. 761

²³ Wood, Brian. "Preventing the Vacuum". pp. 762

troublesome issues which plagued the SADF appear to have been located by SADF intelligence, the first being FAPLA's extensive mine-laying activities.²⁴ SADF intelligence details FAPLA concentration on the defensive mining of surrounding ground, yet South African forces appear to have been poorly-prepared in the event of running into heavy minefields throughout the duration of the 1988 Tumpo action.

The preparatory briefing even laid out the shape of the engagement which was pending. The purpose of the minefields was to slow down SADF approaches towards what would be the defences at the Tumpo Triangle.²⁵ These delays would allow FAPLA forces to withdraw before the SADF was able to inflict any casualties. On the basis of a scouting evaluation of enemy positions, intelligence predicted the circumstances which would be likely to force a FAPLA retreat, as well as the most likely route that would be taken. This gathered intelligence ought to have enabled the SADF to prepare in advance to counter FAPLA withdrawals, boosting favourable conditions for Operation Hooper. A surprising failure to exploit intelligence information suggests that there are possible factors which have been overlooked. Negotiations involving Angola had tentatively begun in December of 1987, and it is possible that political considerations had begun to interfere with South Africa's war effort in Angola, favouring relative restraint in dealing with its Luanda enemy.

Next, we address the accounts of those writing 'against' the SADF - their positions are those outlined in Chapter 4 of this work. In this section, we underline how these conflict with the positions put forward by SADF supporters and weigh up some of the claims made against the 'SADF version' of events. We begin by following the structure presented earlier, commencing with the views articulated by Ronnie Kasrils.

Ronnie Kasrils focuses much of his writing on what he calls the "outcomes" of the Cuito battle, which range from the SADF withdrawal from Angola, to the independence of Namibia, and, most importantly for him, the end of apartheid in South Africa.²⁶ The ANC is linked to Cuba in an inclusive liberation momentum. The shortcoming of such reasoning is that Kasrils has not established a clear causality between these episodes, and has perpetrated an argumentative fallacy known as, "Post hoc ergo propter hoc" or "because of ... therefore". Many other external factors which were more important to the end of apartheid are simply overlooked. Quite apart from the impact of anti-apartheid financial sanctions, it is arguable, for instance, that the end of the Cold War hurried on the end of apartheid because of its consequences for the linked

²⁴ Appendix E To Staff Appreciation of Operation Hooper. pp.20

²⁵ Appendix E To Staff Appreciation of Operation Hooper. pp.20

²⁶ By no means is this mistake limited to Ronnie Kasrils.

relationship between an anti-communist South Africa and the United States. Without American backing, it is unlikely that Pretoria could have maintained its domestic status quo for long.

This is also, in a way, propounded by Jorge Risquet, who believes that the end of apartheid could only have been due to the “the work of the people themselves”²⁷, and not as a consequence of a South African defeat at Cuito Cuanavale. A further misjudgement by Kasrils is that he believes that the SADF acted for one reason, whereas it was really acting for another. The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale is attributed to a design upon capture and occupation, whereas all the available evidence points to the target being the clearing of FAPLA. It is arguable that Ronnie Kasrils then also misreads an observation in the account given by Jan Breytenbach, commander of 32 Battalion, in which he notes that “the Unita soldiers did a lot of dying” on 23 March 1988. This is interpreted to mean that UNITA infantry were being pushed forward callously as cannon fodder to spare white South African lives. Although minimising SADF casualties was clearly always a major consideration, it needs to be borne in mind that UNITA was not operating as a mere tool of the South Africans. As has already been pointed out in Chapter 3, UNITA forces and SADF forces operated in tandem in what was a joint campaign in the event that UNITA was unable to accomplish its objectives by itself.

The necessity for UNITA to assume a frontal role was always primarily a political necessity, given circumstances in which there were looming negotiations. South Africa’s posture was to attempt not to appear be the aggressor and to be in Angola only to act in support of UNITA, as it was officially UNITA’s war against the MPLA. Yet another assertion is one made by other authors such as Horace Campbell, and which is only partially accurate. Contrary to the claim that Pretoria fielded over 9000 troops in the territory, the SADF fielded approximately 5000 men in total throughout the war, a contingent which was never deployed in full at the same time. In fact, in its campaign South Africa fielded approximately 1500 men at a time who served a period of three months – exemplified as cycles of conscript service, or the regular changing of National Servicemen. At the time of the ‘battle of Cuito Cuanavale’ Bridgland states that the SADF had only 3000 men deployed in Angolan, whilst the build up of FAPLA aligned forces at Cutio totalled 15000.²⁸

Kasrils also exaggerates the nature of the Cuban position in the closing stage of hostilities, by depicting the action at Ruacana as a major battle which was won by Havana’s forces. More ‘pro-SADF’ perspectives attach little actual significance to this very late encounter, notwithstanding

²⁷ "Interview with Jorge Risquet." In *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia*, edited by David Deutschmann, by David Deutschman, 1. Melbourne, Vic., Australia: Ocean Press, 1989. Pp. 23

²⁸ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa: Twelve Months That Transformed a Continent*. Gibraltar: Ashanti, 1990. Pp.183

reports of over 300 Cuban casualties for the loss of fewer than a dozen SADF soldiers who were killed in the bombing of their bridge position. The transparency of Kasrils's political agenda emerges repeatedly through his partisan championing of Cuban motives, with Havana lauded, for instance, for pulling up at the Namibian border in order not to jeopardise the Namibian independence negotiations. Cuba's military might is credited for having the SADF withdraw from Angola before the first Cuban withdrawal, despite this agreed evacuation by Pretoria having been a stipulation of those self-same negotiations. Kasrils's questionable assertions and politically-driven judgements could certainly be said to weaken his argument.

Isaac Saney extends the Ronnie Kasrils interpretation. For example, he terms the 'Battle of Cuito Cuanavale' to have been the largest battle in Africa since World War II. This is almost certainly an exaggeration, when one considers the pitched ferocity of a conflict such as the Nigerian-Biafran War of 1967-1970, which recorded over 100,000 military casualties and at least one million civilian dead. It might be more reasonable to characterise the conflict in Angola *as a whole* as one of the largest-scale conflicts in Africa since the Second World War. Numerous SADF-placed sources take this view, just as, equally, they depict the cluster of actions which are suggested to have constituted the 'battle of Cuito Cuanavale' as having been relatively minor compared with the clashes which marked the military events of 1987.

Saney, naturally, is highly critical of writers who take the SADF version at face value, dismissing them as historical denialists who are covering up the truth about Cuito Cuanavale. While Isaac Saney's conclusion is that the SADF suffered a heavy defeat, a common enough position, he differs from others of a similar vein in that he does give some consideration to the notion that the town was not a target for the SADF. Yet he still dismisses it as an improbable concoction to deflect what had occurred.

The Saney argument is that South Africa wanted to use Cuito as an airbase. This rests on a large – and shaky – assumption that Pretoria was embarking on a lengthy and expanding campaign against the MPLA for which Cuito Cuanavale was needed to serve as a forward airbase. That idea flies in the face of the fact that Cuito Cuanavale was outside of the territory that the SADF was trying to assist UNITA to regain, and also overlooks the fact that it had been shelling the Cuito runways which would surely have been counter-productive. Moreover, this author also relies on Horace Campbell as an authority for the much-cited P.W Botha trip to the front, attributing it to the urgency of having to deal with a crisis of command within the SADF. Here, it appears that Botha visited Angola in 1988, around the time of the Tumpo battles, when he had actually toured the front on 28 September 1987, shortly after the SADF had hit its FAPLA enemy hard and effectively. This line has, as its starting point, the goal of showing how the

'Battle for Cuito Cuanavale' brought on the end of apartheid, but its overriding purpose is to demonstrate the depth to which Cuba ought to have been praised for aiding the Angolans in their struggle for survival.

The next figure to consider is Fidel Castro himself but, first, we should look at the theme which is reflected in all of the articles emanating from this camp, that of the broader question of Cuban aid to Africa. Cuban aid is portrayed as an act of exceptional altruism, without any expectation of reciprocity, debt obligation or repayment in any form. Castro's Angolan perspective is even titled, "Paying our debt to humanity", underscoring claims that, unlike the neo-colonialism of Western powers, Cuba neither asked for, nor gained, anything from extending its hand to Africa. This contention is, arguably, at the very least open to some question: Havana may not have gained economically in any measurable way, but it was building useful relationships which would be useful to it for its future survival internationally. In that respect, Isaac Saney's emphatic view that Cuba was not acting as a Soviet proxy may be seen as indirectly illuminating. Saney shows this by offering multiple sources; Piero Gleijeses, the *Economist*, and Fidel Castro.²⁹ From Gleijeses work Saney states:

"On the basis of a comprehensive study of the archival material of the United States, Cuba, Britain, Belgium, and Portugal and interviews with more than 150 individuals ... he (Gleijeses) concludes that the Cuban government decided to dispatch the combat troops to Angola to repel and invasion and that the Soviet Union had no role in Cuba's decision and was not even informed prior to deployment".³⁰

If Saney's understanding of the situation is correct Moscow and Havana were increasingly drifting apart, with the Soviet Union stumbling towards dissolution. Moscow's growing rapprochement with Washington was deeply troubling for the Cuban leadership, which needed trustworthy global allies.

As such, Africa posed a political opportunity for Cuba. If it could secure and maintain the goodwill of sympathetic African leaders, it could muster some backing – African states aligned to Cuba might help to sway international votes or bring matters involving threats to the island to the United Nations. That was the merit in aiding African states – especially ones in trouble, like the newly-independent Angola. It need not be seen necessarily as entirely acts of altruistic solidarity. Thus, what could be said of arguments in support of the notion that the nature of Cuban aid was benign, is that in legitimising Cuba's strategic intervention in Angola on behalf of

²⁹ Saney, Isaac. "African Stalingrad: The Cuban Revolution, Internationalism, and the End of Apartheid." *Latin American Perspectives* 33 (2006). pp.92

³⁰ Saney, Isaac. "African Stalingrad" pp.92

the MPLA the issue turned not only on ideological or political factors, but on that of morality as well.

Fidel Castro's "Debt to Humanity" account amounts to, as expected, a triumphalist Angolan narrative, in which Cuban forces are represented as having done everything with unfailing effectiveness. The failures by FAPLA forces are attributed to the Angolans, who had failed to respond properly to Cuban military influence and direction. On the subject of Cuban strategic advice to the Angolan forces Castro states in relation to the SADF counter offensive in 1987:

*"Our views were heeded in 1986, but unfortunately they were not heeded sufficiently in 1987 and events unfolded just as we expected."*³¹

Just as Cuban intervention was morally legitimate, the MPLA's mounting of an offensive against its internal opponents was emphatically its moral right – it was, in its way, the waging of a just war. On this point, numerous critics would, of course, argue that in the turbulent course of events which led up to the Angolan civil war, it is arguable that the MPLA behaved as reprehensibly as both the FNLA and UNITA, for all of these parties ignored peaceful due process in creating conditions for a fair election. The theme of legitimacy is also reflected in the writings of Jorge Risquet, who mirrors Castro's rhetoric, but with the additional element of shared kinship, as aiding an African state was also about solidarity with struggling African people, as many Cubans are descended from African heritage. For Risquet, the Cuban intervention was due to that historic solidarity, and it was legitimised by the fact that Cubans were, in effect, honorary Africans.

Regardless of invoking a mystical historical bond between populations as a device to bestow legitimacy upon what was a foreign military adventure, as with Pretoria, this was a case of opportunistic international intervention. Castro joined in on the question of Cuito Cuanavale as a pivotal moment in the upheavals being experienced in Southern Africa, but it is also made clear that the action there prompted the decision to turn it into a propaganda symbol.

*"We had to safeguard Cuito Cuanavale and prevent the enemy from wiping out the Angolan forces and capturing the town, which was becoming a symbol of resistance and of the success of failure of South Africa."*³²

The emotive nature of statements like this are what gave Castro his power, but the basis is just that, emotive. Castro makes it clear that the goal of the South Africans was to wipe out the FAPLA forces and capture Cuito Cuanavale. We now know that the SADF had weighed up the

³¹ Castro, Fidel. "Paying Our Debt to Humanity." pp. 107

³² Castro, Fidel. "Paying Our Debt to Humanity." pp. 109

pros and cons of attempting to capture the town and decided otherwise, but it highlights that either Castro had poor information or instead had chosen to weave his own narrative out of the situation provided. For Castro, the outcome of a successful Angolan defence paved the way to the negotiations, as the balance of power had been altered decisively. Yet, as we know all too well, the Cubans and the Angolans had been negotiating with South Africa through the intermediary of the United States since November 1987.³³

It is fairly obvious that all parties to the Angolan war crisis subscribed to some negotiated resolution and settlement. And if none of them needed to be driven to the negotiating table, the war across Angolan soil was essentially a tool for creating leverage. The proposition that the 'Battle of Cuito Cuanavale' created the conditions *for* multi-party negotiations is simply far too reductionist an interpretation, one which overlooks all the other complex factors which led to a diplomatic settlement. In this context, Jorge Risquet has suggested a somewhat more nuanced understanding of the jostling at play in this highly-charged period. Viewing the regional situation as a kind of see-saw tussle for ascendancy, he has argued that the balance of 'brokering' authority around negotiations shifted from 1987, when the SADF held the balance of power in Angola, to 1988, when the balance of power tilted towards the Cubans. Again, though, this approach does not take adequate account of on-going political processes within South Africa itself which would have influenced foreign policy decisions, such as the SADF's strategic withdrawal before a breakthrough in negotiations.

A final set of claims to be addressed are those of Horace Campbell. Campbell's writings on this topic have been widely cited, by both Ronnie Kasrils and Isaac Saney, as well as by the experienced journalist, Victoria Brittain, (ex-Third World editor of the British *Guardian* newspaper). Campbell's exaggeration of the scale of the SADF troop deployment is a prime example of what might be termed the 'over-egging' of a dish in support of a particular line. This is best shown by his claim that

*"... by the end of December the South Africans had lost more than 230 soldiers and UNITA over 1000. The South Africans lost over 41 aircraft, three helicopters and over 31 vehicles."*³⁴

, further stating

*"With these heavy losses the operational command structure of Operation Modular broke down."*³⁵

³³ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 316

³⁴ Campbell, Horace. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. pp. 22

³⁵ Campbell, Horace. *The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale*. pp. 23

Aside from his assertions, he provides no backup for this claim, and it does not fit alongside the literature which depicts an orderly withdrawal from Angola. He also fails to mention the Lomba battles which saw the FAPLA forces fall back to beyond the Cuito river whilst sustaining heavy casualties. This author also appears to be a principal source of the view that P.W. Botha's Angolan visit was in response to some military leadership crisis. Similarly, Campbell points to the morale-boosting experience of FAPLA victories at Cuito Cuanavale instilling confidence in ordinary Angolan soldiers. We know from reliably-documented SADF records of these actions that there were few if any infantry battles after the first assault of 1988. The favourable outcome of those encounters with the South African enemy is supposed to have led to the construction of airstrips at Cuito Cuanavale – whereas it was the local availability of landing facilities which explains why FAPLA used it as a base, launching MiG fighter jets from there throughout the conflict.

Bearing in mind distortions or inaccuracies of that kind, it appears that the Angolan war narratives produced by prominent anti-SADF authors have major shortcomings. A big drawback is that they lack the first-hand primary resource of 'an account of record', a documentary narrative drawn directly from the field of operations, and not compiled with an eye to any historical judgements to serve the purposes of hindsight. A source such as *A concise history of Operation Modular* provides us with a point of comparison which we can measure against secondary literature, and not least with the re-tellings of campaign episodes by some of the soldiers, officers, and commanders involved. It remains unclear as to whether the Cuban camp has any really comparable campaign compilation. As far as it has been possible to establish, only the historian, Pierro Gleijeses, has been able to obtain access to the Cuban archives dealing with the island's expeditionary military mission to Africa, and the work produced from that exploration, *Conflicting Missions*, while very interesting, adopts a pronounced Havana line and, unfortunately for the purposes of the present study, does not extend its scope to encompass the 1987-1988 conflict. What Gleijeses does successfully show throughout *Conflicting Missions*, is that Cuba acted out of its own agency in many African countries which the Soviet Union showed little interest in. This can go some way in explaining the lacklustre support of the MPLA that Soviet Union provided, and highlights (by design) the sacrifices made by Cuba in support of Africa.

At the same time, in advancing a critique of a Cuban Angolan narrative, it is not to say that the literature on the SADF side of affairs can be held to represent an entirely accurate picture of this Angolan episode. After all, put simply, the fact that one narrative may be seriously flawed does not necessarily prove that the other should be taken to be completely flawless. Still, and specifically in the case of Cuito Cuanavale, the SADF account is seemingly more credible.

Evidence that Cuito Cuanavale was not a primary strategic goal is both repeated and coherent, as confirmed by routine operational objectives, interviews with generals, possible plans drawn up by Tactical HQ, and by the issue in the field of precise operational instructions.

It is important to note that the narratives of “victory” or of “success” in Angola are not so much in direct disagreement with each other, it is more that both emphasise a different time period in the conflict’s history. The SADF’s version of events emphasises the victories of 1987, the accounts of which are generally credible and can be accounted for by reference to different sources. Cumulatively, the military advances of that year fell short of what might have constituted a victory for the regional interests of apartheid South Africa, but neither, if one follows the SADF operational record, was there any point at which it would have been possible to identify anything which resembled what might be seen as having been an over-arching defeat. Inevitably, then, as Fred Bridgland has labelled it, “jaw-jaw” supplanted “war-war” in Angola.³⁶ This was, arguably, an armed episode in which it could be said that none of the principal parties involved, “lost” the war.

Lastly, a more credible evaluation is that advanced by Gary Baines in his recent, 2014 study, *South Africa’s ‘Border War’: Contested Narratives and Conflicting memories*. Baines’s alternate perspective has drawn on the views of retired SADF generals and other Angolan War veterans, as well as on the writings of authors from across what might be characterised as the mutual detraction debate, in order to try to establish a more balanced interpretation. As a result of this Baines comes to a conclusion about the outcome of Angolan Border War:

“In my opinion, the most insightful and pithy summation of the outcome of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale (and the ‘Border War’) is offered by Elaine Windrich, who dubs it a war without victors or vanquished. This is because both sides accepted negotiations with an enemy that had not yet surrendered.”³⁷

He goes on to further state:

“The appearance of a situation in which there were no losers, only winners, made the negotiations possible.”³⁸

This ties in to propaganda war that enveloped the withdrawal of forces from Angola, most importantly the phrase “*The appearance*”, all sides have attempted to appear as if they were in control. All of the authors referenced in this piece, whether their thoughts were captured in an

³⁶ Bridgland, Fred. *The War for Africa*. pp. 336

³⁷ Baines, Gary. *South Africa’s ‘Border War’: Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. E-book for Kindle. Loc 2568

³⁸ Baines, Gary. *South Africa’s ‘Border War’*. loc 2568

article, book, interview, or official documents have posited that their side held the agency to progress the process of 'Linkage' / 'Constructive Engagement'.

Baines' reaches this conclusion by examining each claim to victory, and also each defence against having been defeated, and by then finding that none are sufficiently compelling or clear cut in such a way that one party's victory meant another party's defeat. While the pivotal negotiations that occurred in 1988 played a key role in assuring the parties involved that there were no losers in the war, Baines' suggests that this resolution was only feasible in the exceptional circumstances that everyone was able to walk away from those diplomatic dealings with a claim to victory.³⁹ What mattered was what they were able to reflect as national entities – militarily, they had not lost any face and their honour had been preserved. The South Africans were able to claim a victory over communism as well as to point to their victories in 1987. For their part, the Cubans were able to claim that they had defeated the oppressive apartheid regime which had trespassed into Angola. Meanwhile, both South Africa and Cuba were relieved by the prospect of being able to withdraw their troops with flags still flying, free of the burden of any innate implications of defeat. Along with these external political forces, another of Baines's contentions is that the MPLA and UNITA were both also able to claim a victory after the negotiations.

While soldiering experience is an aspect which falls outside of the scope of this present study, it might be suggested that notions of victory in Angola meant little to ordinary South African conscripts, or to Cuban soldiers shipped out to Africa. It is certainly the view of Gary Baines that the most obvious losers in bearing the heavy human costs of the entire border war affair were the people of Angola.

*"Actually, the only losers were the Angolan people because the civil war was to continue for more than another decade. In the final analysis, the Cuban and South African withdrawal from Angola did not bring peace to that country or the region."*⁴⁰

³⁹ Baines, Gary. South Africa's 'Border War'. loc 2590

⁴⁰ Baines, Gary. South Africa's 'Border War'. loc 2590

Concluding Perspective

In its conception, the present study has attempted to engage with, and to draw upon, principally the most credible historical records in an effort to explain an important phase of the late history of armed struggle in Southern Africa. In discussion, we have weighed up what might be characterised as the narrative of the SADF, and of commentators in whose view South Africa won a resounding victory in the field of battle in Angola, as well as the narrative of writers for whom the SADF and South Africa were dealt a decisive defeat at Cuito Cuanavale. As monolithic interpretations, both narratives convey a questionable version of the Angolan 'endgame' of 1987-1988. Both are partial, in that each emphasises a military outcome to the crisis. Some more recent authors like Leopold Scholtz have provided a counter-history - even though he features as part of what can be seen as a pro-SADF narrative, he is also part of a more critical reading of events, wary of simplification and of political bias. The Rhodes University historian, Gary Baines, is also sceptical of the notion of a military outcome in Angola, and his scholarship calls into question the official ANC viewpoint of a South African defeat.

It is arguable that the SADF sources for the unfolding shape of the Angolan war are reasonably credible. Writers such as Scholtz have fashioned fairly balanced accounts, and a common feature of such authors is an acknowledgement of both the failures and the victories of the SADF. Most of the accounts consulted for the present purpose contain close-hand documenting of the conflict, ranging from a top-down overview of battles provided by Helmoed Romer-Heitman to first-person observations relayed from Fred Bridgland's interviews with South African officers and soldiers. This material paints a very similar picture to that portrayed in the SADF's own *Concise History of Operation Modular*, the document created by the SADF to record the effectiveness - and otherwise - of their operations in the field. The record provided by these sources reveals that the operations undertaken by the SADF during 1987 were highly effective. This is confirmed by a battle-centric assessment of military fortunes in Angola, as it places FAPLA and Cuban forces in a considerably weakened position in 1988. Crucially, for the South African camp, the frustrating of the FAPLA advance in 1987 meant that it was unlikely to be able to launch a big breakthrough offensive in 1988.

In the much-aired case of the 'Battle of Cuito Cuanavale', the SADF stance is consistent in that there is no convincing evidence to confirm an express intention of capture and occupation of the town. The South Africans may have toyed with the prospect of overrunning it, but higher international politics and concerns over the strategic direction of the SADF's expeditionary campaign ruled out that option. As suggested in preceding discussion, the situation - at its simplest - was one of damned if it did, and damned if it did. Had South Africa taken the town, it would have been exposed to world scrutiny as a neo-colonial power, moving in to seize hold of

an independent Angola. Thereafter, whenever the time arrived for an inevitable Cuito withdrawal by the SADF, the MPLA and its Cuban ally would have been able to claim a major victory in reclaiming it.

The greatest weakness of the pro-SADF narrative is that it contests only the military aspects, suggesting a position of advantage instead of a military defeat, in contrast to opposing claims of a SADF rout at Cuito Cuanavale. The reality is that a military outcome is not as strong an argument as one based around the complex influence of negotiations and strategic elements. For, although it could be said that South Africa's incursion into Angola was tactically effective, notching up major fighting gains in the field, its fate would be decided by the strategy of another sphere – that of world opinion, by then unremittingly hostile to the apartheid state and to it asserting its power across its own national borders.

Accordingly, South Africa did not secure an overall victory in Angola, and that is why any critical understanding of the Angolan war ought to take adequate account of the role and the outcome of the negotiations. It was the negotiations mediated by the United States which secured concessions to produce circumstances in which it could be said that there was no clear 'winner'. In return for the withdrawal of Cuban forces and the expulsion of their own antagonistic 'liberation movement' forces from Angola, the South Africans were required to withdraw from the territory and to agree to Namibian independence. Apartheid South Africa was unable to maintain all of its interests, however effective had been the performance of the SADF in its see-saw contest with FAPLA. Equally, Pretoria also emerged from these negotiations not exactly empty-handed. The removal from the region of the menace of Cuban forces, combined with the simultaneous collapse of the Soviet Union, allowed the apartheid government to claim that Southern Africa was safe from a communist contagion and opened a door to domestic reform.

Gary Baines has suggested that knowledge of the fall of the Soviet Union is an example of *Post hoc* logic, inserted to rationalise the position of the apartheid government. This can, though, be modified by pointing to the earlier establishment of relations between South Africa and the Soviet Union before its collapse. Still, what counts is its place in the balance of external political forces that created the conditions for a resolution of the Angolan war, framed within a more fluid and complex situation in which politics played a central role in determining the outcome of the military conflicts which beset Southern Africa in the final years of white minority rule.

In the aftermath of South Africa's transition to majority rule, its ANC government, as noted, has taken the position that the SADF was defeated at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale and that this had a causal link with the overthrow of apartheid. The motivation behind this is inescapably

political, part of sustaining the proclaimed ties of international solidarity between the ANC and the Communist Party of Cuba. Much more recently, however, Gary Baines has focused on the possibility of a different reason for the ANC position, one that is more subtle, and which is also much closer to the events that took place immediately after the negotiations in 1988. Almost as a collateral cost to ensure a satisfactory end to diplomatic proceedings, as part of the tripartite settlement ANC forces were expelled from Angola.¹ To save face, it needed to adopt a convenient 'battle-centric' line which implied that there was no longer any need for a defensive ANC presence in Angola, rather than admitting that it had been evicted by its anti-colonial allies. The attempt to save face has resulted, inevitably, in the alienation of a section of the South African population which feels that its military history and service experience in Angola has been smothered.

Since the 2008 commemorations, ANC-endorsed history of the Angolan war has manifested itself in varied forms, including a documentary film, *The End of the World*, which aired on the state-owned public broadcaster, the SABC. This work reiterated the battle-centric narrative centred upon Cuito Cuanavale as a turning point. Other attempts, characteristically more clumsy, have included South Africa's president, Jacob Zuma, who has even asserted that the ANC's Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) soldiers had fought at Cuito Cuanavale. This "rewriting" or falsification of history, as critics see it, has been met by predictable hostility from some white SADF veterans, who have responded by joining like-minded ex-soldier communities, writing, sharing and talking about their wartime experiences in Angola. Alongside this essentially enclosed kind of war commemoration, in the official public sphere the conflict has not been elevated and sustained in the conventional way, through regular rounds of speeches, marches, gatherings and memorials. Instead, the Angolan crisis has come to feature in the South African high school matriculation syllabus as a Cold War case study. The study material and its assessment basis has a focus, all too understandably, on the "Battle for Cuito Cuanavale". For government history education planners, if not for academics such as Gary Baines, a preoccupation with military defeat and military victory continues to linger.

¹ Baines, Gary. South Africa's 'Border War': Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. E-book for Kindle. Loc 2601.

What Remains

The Angolan 'Border War' remains a hot-button topic in South African history, throughout the writing of this thesis multiple books have been published, and in some cases republished to feed the need for understanding and discussion which is thriving, especially amongst the white South African soldiers who fought either in Angola, or on the border of Namibia. The trend within narratives surrounding Cutio Cuanavale is that they are provided by authority figures, people with something to gain or an image to maintain. This provides a starting framework to construct a more balanced framework as we know where the extremes lie. The next move is to aim at a more social history, to gather first hand experiences and compare them to the 'ideal' narratives that have already been entrenched.

A common enough occurrence in the literature surrounding the Angolan war is to find a book by a General or ranking officer, but what is more uncommon is a compiled collection of foot soldiers memories about Cutio Cuanavale. These men can be found throughout South Africa, and they are aching for their stories to be told. In my personal capacity I have met a recce (SADF Reconnaissance / Special Forces) who struggles with aligning his past with what is being said, and I was sought out by a man who was at Cutio Cuanavale. At the time I was an honours student and this was over my head, but it shows a desire for their voices to be heard. There are also the claims that the ANC was present in Angola at the time, if this is true there should be someone who can provide an account of their experience aswell, which can only help in balancing what really happened.

Aside from a very granular approach in going directly to the ground level of history, there are also studies to be done at a grander political level. The major players in the Angolan war, were Angola, South Africa, and Cuba. So a more holistic narrative could be constructed by individual studies on the political and social situations in each of these countries in parallel to events within Angola.

The question of outcomes of Cutio Cuanavale, and the war in general, is often brought up in both academic papers, and books. However, this tends to be a paragraph or short chapter but a study of the outcomes in depth for all of the players involved, including the USSR and the United States. Most of the stated outcomes are not questioned, or challenged but in this hyperthetical study they would need to be attacked as the supposed outcomes have a huge impact on why the different parties acted within Angola.

The topic of the border war is clearly an immense undertaking, but it remains important to hundreds of South Africans, and surely to the people of Angola and Cuba. However, the sometimes violently differing narratives show that there is no consensus on the events, motives, or outcomes. The time for these studies is now, the archival resources are becoming more available as the years progress, new books are being published on the topic every year and the people who fought the battles are still alive and want to talk. If ever there was a time to study the Angolan war, it is now.

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